

THIRD EDITION.

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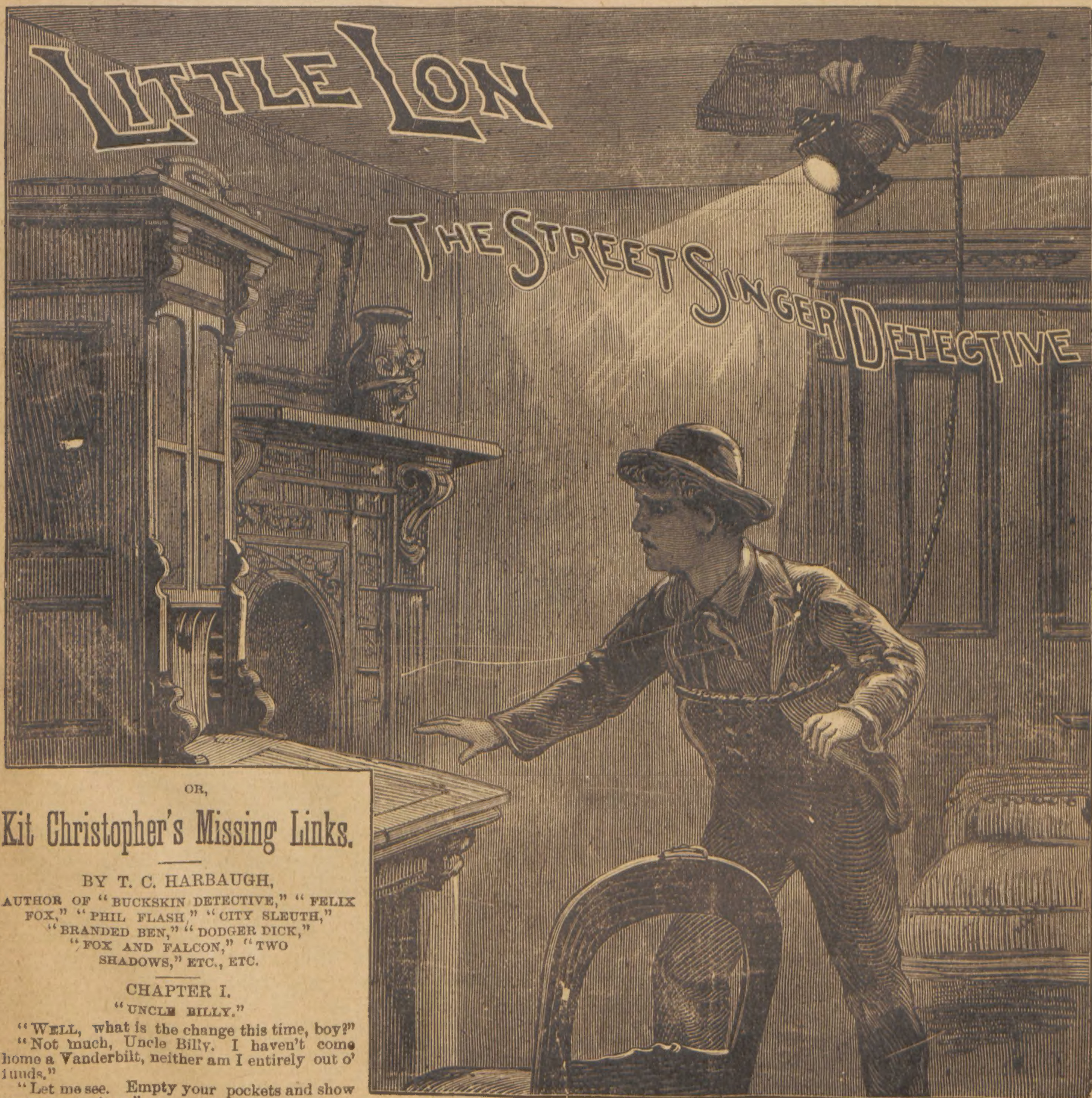
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OR,

Kit Christopher's Missing Links.

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AUTHOR OF "BUCKSKIN DETECTIVE," "FELIX
FOX," "PHIL FLASH," "CITY SLEUTH,"
"BRANDED BEN," "DODGER DICK,"
"FOX AND FALCON," "TWO
SHADOWS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"UNCLE BILLY."

"WELL, what is the change this time, boy?"

"Not much, Uncle Billy. I haven't come
home a Vanderbilt, neither am I entirely out o'
funds."

"Let me see. Empty your pockets and show
up your earnings."

The person thus spoken to was a small boy,

THE MEN AT THE TRAP GAVE THE STREET-SINGER ENOUGH ROPE TO LET HIM REACH
THE DESK.

poorly dressed. He might have been fifteen, but it were hard to tell, for his figure was quite diminutive, almost dwarfish. His hair and eyes were intensely black, and the latter sparkled with good humor which was his constant companion.

Walking up to the table, at which sat a man of fifty, with a fat figure and a pitted face, the boy emptied his pantaloons pockets, depositing on the board a number of nickels and pennies.

"Not so bad, after all," exclaimed the man, his eyes glistening at sight of the cash. "It is just one dollar and sixty cents."

"All good money, too, Uncle Billy," observed the boy, which observation was confirmed by a nod.

Leaving the man to divide the money into two heaps, the pennies on the right, and the nickels on the left, the boy went to a small cupboard at one side of the room and began an attack on some cold victuals which he found there.

"Here, boy," suddenly called the fat man, and the little fellow left the cupboard in a twinkling.

"This is an 'individual coin,'" continued Uncle Billy, holding up a bit of copper which he had taken from one of the piles. "Of course you don't know where you got it?"

"I couldn't tell if I was to get the world for doing so," was the answer.

"I overlooked it when I went through the cash a while ago. You can see for yourself that it's not money."

The boy took the false coin which was the exact size of and resembled a small cent, and bent forward to examine it in the light of the gas jet which burned near the wall and over the table.

"I see now," he said, without looking up, for he was inspecting the copper. "Brawn & Borrow, Grocers, State street, Chicago. Well, Uncle Billy, this little fellow is a good way from home," and he threw the coin on the table and watched it roll back to its companions."

The fat man's hand made a quick dive for it and snatched it up from the edge of the heap, and held it before him.

"It'll pass, Lon; yes, I can get it off, and it won't stay on my hands very long, either. I don't like anything that isn't money."

"You never said anything truer than that, Uncle Billy," remarked the boy, under his breath as the man continued:

"What struck me so forcibly when I picked this piece up the second time was the first name—Brawn. Now, I used to know a man named Brawn and the police wanted him the worst kind. I should think so, ha, ha, ha!"

"What did they want him for?" innocently asked the boy, his eyes suddenly glowing.

"For something crooked of course. It goes without saying that the police don't want honest gentlemen, eh, boy?"

Uncle Billy looked over the copper piece and let a broad smile overrun his pitted face.

"They never got Benjamin Brawn," he went on. "He was too shrewd for the city ferrets. Now, here's the same name on this piece of copper. 'Brawn & Borrow, Chicago,' and we find the copper in New York. Kinder queer, eh, boy?"

"It's on its travels, sir," replied the little fellow, sending a wistful glance toward the cupboard from whose contents he had been summoned before he was half through."

He was not disturbed, again, until he had finished the cold meal, when he came toward the table, wiping his mouth and looking at Uncle Billy figuring in a dog-eared book with a poor back.

"Done, are you?" the man said, looking up at the boy. "How would you like something permanent?"

"What is it, Uncle Billy?"

The fat man opened a drawer in the table and took out a small piece of paper clipped from a daily and pushed it toward the boy.

Then he went on with his calculation while his little companion took up the clipping and read as follows:

"WANTED—SMALL BOY.

"A small, active boy is wanted at No. 444 D—street, second floor, room 8. Apply after eight o'clock, p. m. Must be small, but not too young. Good pay for good work."

"I guess that means a chap like me," laughed the boy as he handed back the advertisement. "Small and not too young." Just suits me, eh, Uncle Billy?"

"Yes, and I want you to answer it," was the reply. "I cut it out of an afternoon paper, so you see it's fresh. Go into the closet there and put on another suit. Then see what is to be had at Number 444 D—street."

Little Lon, as the boy was called wherever

known, retired to a closet under a stairway and began to clothe himself in a suit which he found on a hook there.

While he was thus engaged, the man at the table finished his problem, whatever it was, and dropped the boy's earnings through the top of a small iron safe that occupied one corner of the room.

"If the boy can get the place I won't have to depend on his street rakings any more," chuckled Uncle Billy. "The wind blows unexpected things into a fellow's lap, sometimes. Now, the occupants of Room 8 do not know that Little Lon is in my employ, and they needn't find out, either. They may have heard him sing on the streets, as thousands of people have; but, beyond that, they are in the dark. Let me get the little chap established in their employ, and I guess I'll make dollars where it's cents now."

By this time Little Lon had effected the desired change, and stood before the man in garments which strikingly altered his appearance.

"You'll get the place if they see you!" exclaimed the man with evident satisfaction, surveying the boy from head to foot. "Now, it makes no difference about the wages. You are to come back in the employ of the occupants of Room 8."

"How do you know there are more than one there?"

"Never mind that," answered Uncle Billy somewhat sternly. "I don't think they've found a boy to suit them, and as you answer all the requirements, you will come off victorious. Now remember the old injunction, Lon. You are only the New York Nightingale, and you don't know anything about Uncle Billy."

The boy bowed and smiled, then, setting his hat rather jauntily on his head, he waved the fat man good-night and vanished.

"It's kind o' queer how I ran across that boy, but I did, and he's worth his weight in gold!" remarked the man left behind. "He's made me many a dollar by his black eyes and his nightingale voice, and if he suits the men he's after now, he'll make me a good many more. But, he's the queerest thing o' all!" and he took from his waistcoat pocket the copper-piece which had been picked out from among the boy's earnings. "It is Ben Brawn for a thousand!" he went on. "I heard once that he went to Chicago and got into business. Maybe he got to be an honest man, and made a stake, after all. There isn't any date on this bit of copper. It may have been issued years and years ago. What if I address a letter to Brawn & Borrow, Chicago? It will be returned if they're not found. I would like to put my hand on the wily Benjamin of other years. If he has anything, I think I could make it interesting for—Uncle Billy. With my clutch on Brawn, and with Little Lon in the employ of Room 8, I will soon reach the notch I intend to cut at the top of the ladder of fortune. I'll send the letter to the West. It can do me no harm, anyhow."

Uncle Billy—if the man had any other name no one seemed to know it—went to work at once, and during the next ten minutes he was engaged in writing a letter to the firm by whom the penny had been issued.

He did not write very fast, for he wanted to select the sentences that suited him best, and when he finished, he had before him a missive which made certain inquiries after one Mr. Borrow, while the name of Brawn was not mentioned at all.

It happened that the nearest corner lamp had a letter-box attached, and, a few minutes later, the short fat figure of Uncle Billy was there.

He was seen by a man who stood a few feet away and who watched the proceedings of Uncle Billy with a great deal of curiosity. "Perhaps this man knew that Billy never deposited any letters during the day. Indeed, the proprietor of the Boy Nightingale seldom left his room, and his correspondence, which was not large, was always sent off by night."

Having deposited his letter in the box, the fat man returned to his quarters.

In a moment the watcher approached the lamp. He walked up to the letter-box with the air of a person about to deposit some mail; but, instead of doing this, he lifted the iron lid and caught the end of a fine wire at one side of the opening.

In another second he drew from the box a singular and delicate contrivance in the grip of which were several letters.

The man's eyes glistened with triumph.

"No water haul, this time," he remarked, running over the letters by the light of the lamp. "Ah, here it is—Uncle Billy's letter! 'Brawn & Borrow,' Chicago. 'Going back to old times, hey? We'll see about this.'"

He put the fat man's letter on the inside of his coat, and returned the others to the box; then, with a low laugh of delight, walked rapidly away and vanished round the first corner beyond the lamp.

It was a clever piece of mail-box robbing, and one from which we will hear again.

CHAPTER II.

MADE TO PLAY WEASEL.

It would not be stretching a point very far to say that everybody knew Little Lon the street Nightingale of New York.

The boy took in a great many pennies in the course of a day by means of his wonderful voice. Sometimes he would accompany his songs with guitar music, but nearly always he sung with no accompaniment at all.

His usual haunts were middle Broadway and the streets that branch off from it, and quite often he was to be seen among the mansions of Fifth avenue where he was pretty sure to get more than pennies for his work.

Nobody knew who he really was, and, as he followed Uncle Billy's instructions to the letter, the curious had never discovered where he lived.

The lad was unusually bright, and his well molded face and sparkling black eyes always captivated his audiences.

Certain it was that Uncle Billy was not the boy's father, for there was not the slightest resemblance between the two, and if Little Lon had been "pinned down" concerning his identity, he would have been compelled to shake his head.

Honest to a fault, almost, the Nightingale took every penny earned to his master, who, knowing the boy's value, did not growl when the returns were not large.

"Better luck to-morrow," he would say. "Try the avenue again," and the next day the heiresses of the brown stone fronts were treated to an open air concert which seldom went by unappreciated.

Little Lon went to 444 D—street by the shortest route. He seemed as anxious to investigate the advertisement as Uncle Billy was to have him do so, and when he reached the building shortly after eight o'clock he ran nimbly up the stair.

It was the work of a moment for his sharp eyes to find "Room 8," and, after a brief inspection of the premises outside, he announced his presence by a rap.

A hum of voices beyond the door suddenly grew still and a strange voice said, "Come in!"

Little Lon turned the knob and pushed open the door.

"Hello! they keep coming!" laughed one of two men at a table with a look at his companion. "Come forward, boy," and his eyes which were of a steely gray and very discerning, began to look the boy over from head to foot.

Uncle Billy's *protege* saw that the men before him were well-dressed and rather good-looking. One had the most penetrating eyes he had ever seen, while the characteristic of the other was a sharp hook-bill nose.

"Who are you, boy?" continued the man who had invited Little Lon forward.

"I am Lon, the ballad-singer. I guess you've heard me."

"So I have. I thought I detected a certain familiarity about your face. You don't sing any more, eh?"

"Oh, sometimes," answered the boy. "I saw your advertisement and thought there might be something in it for me."

"He's got the right figure," remarked the man to his companion. "He suits me the best of any in this respect. What do you say?"

The stranger with the hawk nose leaned toward Lon and eyed him for a moment.

"Are you capable of employing yourself?" he asked.

"I ought to be, seeing that I've been my own master in such things ever since I knowed anything."

"Where are your parents?"

"They are dead."

"But you have a home—you live with somebody?"

"I live with a friend who won't interfere with any bargain I make."

"That's the kind of a friend to have, boy," smiled the man. "Lock the door, major. We can afford to keep all others out now."

The man called major, he of the gray eyes, crossed the room, locked the door behind Little Lon, and came back to his chair.

"The boy whom we employ must ask no questions," continued the last speaker. "We

are Hunt and Fleece. I am Mr. Fleece. We don't want a boy for very long—say a month at the furthest, but we stand ready to pay the right boy good wages. We will give you fifty dollars to serve us well for thirty days, and the same sum if sooner discharged."

The Nightingale lowered his head, but made no reply.

Without continuing, Mr. Fleece went to one corner of the room and took from behind a curtain a small wooden box which had neither lid nor bottom.

Placing it on the floor near the table, he looked up with a smile at Little Lon.

"Are you weasel enough to crawl through that?" asked he.

"It looks pretty small," was the reply.

"And you're a small one," laughed Hunt.

"Get down and try it with your coat off. You ought to be able to go through a key-hole."

Uncle Billy's *protege* drew his coat off and got down on the floor. Mr. Fleece had already fastened the box to the plank by means of a screw, and the boy found it very small when he thrust his head into the open square.

The next minute he was wriggling his way forward, watched by the two men with expressions of keen satisfaction.

"Now, come back through it feet foremost if you can," said Hunt, and Little Lon did so with as much ease as he had accomplished the first task.

"Bravo, boy!" cried Fleece, rubbing his hands with glee. "You are just the boy we want, and we'll add ten dollars to your wages for your successful exhibition here."

The skeleton box was returned to the corner behind the curtain, and the boy was formally received into the employ of Hunt and Fleece, whose business appeared to be connected with the mysterious by the initiatory ceremonies just performed.

"You don't care about going back to your friend to-night, eh?" asked one of the men.

"I do not."

"Well, we want you to devote your whole time to our service."

"I stand ready to do that."

"Then you will consider the bargain made. Reach forward the lemonade, major."

In a moment a pitcher and glass sat before Little Lon, and the hand of Mr. Hunt poured out some excellent looking lemonade.

The boy thought of nothing wrong as he took up the glass and raised it to his lips.

"Here's to you, gentlemen!" said he, and the two men eyed him while he emptied the glass without stopping, for its contents had a delightful taste.

"We are going out for a little while," remarked Fleece. "Your duty is to watch the office till we return. If you should feel drowsy lock the door and lie down on the cot which you'll find behind yon curtain. Nobody is likely to come but some boy after the place you have secured. Tell him that the situation is filled, and that we don't want any more callers of his sort."

Little Lon promised to comply, and in a short time he was the sole tenant of the room.

The footsteps of the departing men sounded strangely in the boy's ears. A feeling of heaviness which he could not shake off began to take possession of him; his eyelids seemed to become lids of lead.

He was going to sleep!

He got up and tried to keep awake by walking back and forth, but his limbs grew heavy and refused to perform their usual service.

Instead of locking the door he went to the curtain and found an inviting cot by pulling it aside.

It was his last remembered act of consciousness, for he fell forward on the bed, and, in a second, was oblivious of his surroundings.

The street Nightingale could not have thrown off the power of the drug which had been subtly administered if he had possessed the strength of a Hercules. He lay like one dead on the cot.

The city clocks struck hour after hour.

At last Little Lon came back to life.

There was a hand on his shoulder, and by the light of a bull's-eye lantern he discerned the figures of two men, whose faces were concealed by close-fitting masks of dark velvet.

"Look there, boy," said one, pointing at Lon's feet. "Do you think you can crawl through that hole?"

At the same time the light was thrown upon an opening in the floor.

It looked smaller than the skeleton box through which he had squeezed his body for Hunt and Fleece, but Little Lon thought he could get through this opening also.

"You can and you must," said one of the men, somewhat sternly. "A rope will encircle your body under the arms, and when you are through, you will be lowered to the floor below. You will there find a desk, the lid of which will not be locked. Open the desk at once, and take from it an oblong box which you will find in the lower right-hand pigeon-hole."

"That would be burglary!" cried the boy.

"Never mind what it is. You obey us in every particular, or you will never sing another ballad on the streets of New York."

CHAPTER III. THE BURGLARY.

THIS unmistakable threat, sternly spoken by one of the masked men, was enough to blanch the cheeks of the bravest boy.

Little Lon saw the fierce look that accompanied the threat, and instinctively recoiled, but the out-darting hand of the second rogue caught his arm.

"It is too late now, boy. You must go to the end of this. Don't forget for a moment that you are in our employ. We treat you royally as long as you serve us well. If you revolt, look out."

The street singer thought of the drugged lemonade, and the test of the bottomless box, and he knew that the men before him were Hunt and Fleece, whose employ he had entered.

Escape at present was impossible. He was fairly in the grip of the scoundrels; not only this, but his life was in danger if he did not do their bidding.

Without more ado one of the pair began to fix a rope under the boy's arms.

Little Lon looked around to see where he was, but the bull's-eye lantern did not give him much satisfaction. He could determine, however, that he had been carried to a small, dark room, possibly an attic, for a good deal of poor furniture was stored round about, and there were cobwebs over it, showing that the place was but seldom visited.

"Remember! You will find the box in the lower right hand pigeon-hole of the desk," said the stern man, who had a voice like Mr. Fleece. "Don't make any noise, and see that you commit no blunder. Now everything is in readiness. Down you go!"

Uncle Billy's *protege* had by this time made up his mind to carry out the orders which had been issued. He was serving the fat money-shark as well as his new employers, and he was anxious to see what was at the bottom of this mysterious piece of rascality.

"I'll put my friend, Mr. Christopher, the detective, on the trail when I get out of this," thought Lon. "I've tried a trail or two myself, and Kit says I don't do so bad. I think I have a good start already."

In a few moments more he was forcing his body through the trap or opening in the floor, and then he was dangling in mid-air suspended by the cord under his arms.

The bull's-eye glared above him like an evil eye, and Lon knew that the watchful orbs of the two men were behind it.

He was lowered to the floor beneath, and the rays of the lantern showed him a large, old-fashioned desk in one corner of a good-sized room.

The men at the trap gave the street-singer enough rope to let him reach the desk, which he found unlocked as had been prophesied.

When he opened the paneled lid that hid the pigeon-holes he was confronted by a lot of papers. He was anxious to secure something that would give him a clew to the owner of the desk, and he resolved to do so despite the Argus-eyes overhead.

The lowest pigeon-hole on the right hand side was easily found, and a thrill passed through the boy's frame when his searching fingers found a box there.

It was a long flat box though capable of holding some papers.

Little Lon grasped it with a good deal of eagerness, but, at the same time, he pulled out with it on the other side something which his sense of touch told him was a letter.

Of course it would be found to be addressed to the owner of the box.

With the box and letter secured, the boy burglar closed the desk and stepped back. In a moment he was again in the air, but this time he was moving upward.

All at once he slipped the letter from beneath the box into an inner pocket, and continued on his journey.

Hearty expressions of satisfaction rewarded him when he again squeezed himself through the trap, and the box was taken from his hands.

"You took the best course, as we knew you would," remarked one of the men as the trap was closed. "Now you shall soon go back to your street work if you wish; but you'll find us clever employers for some time yet."

The box by this time had disappeared, the boy knew not whither, though he thought he could have guessed.

He was suddenly blindfolded by hands from behind, and as the handkerchief was drawn tight a voice said at his ear:

"Good treatment for good service, boy. Don't forget this."

Not long afterward Little Lon felt the pleasant air of a summer night on his face, then he was helped into a carriage and driven swiftly away.

Not a word was spoken in his presence during the ride over the streets of New York, and after awhile the bandage was taken from the boy's eyes and lo! he was once more in Room 8.

All this seemed a dream to Little Lon.

He could hardly believe that he had actually been one of the chief actors in a burglary, but his surroundings and a soreness where the rope had pressed convinced him that such was the case.

He did not return to the letter in his coat till he was alone again. The men who had brought him back to the room had disappeared and the city clocks of which there were two in the near neighborhood, told him that New York would soon be awake again.

Little Lon drew forth the letter and bent forward to read it by the faint flushes of morning which stole in at a window.

He found a well-worn manilla envelope in his hand, and by dint of hard scrutiny, he managed to read the inscription.

It read:
"CARLOS CONDINE, Esq.,
285 Blank St., New York."

"I never heard of Mr. Condine," mentally said the boy. "Now, let us see what is on the inside."

He next robbed the envelope of its contents, and soon held in his hands what appeared to be a business letter, which he decided not to read at present.

The morning light grew stronger, and by and by the hum of the city's rush was heard on the street beneath the windows.

An intolerable thirst racked Little Lon's throat, and a strange hunger gnawed at his vitals.

"It is the work of the drugged lemonade!" he exclaimed. "I must have something to eat. Can I go back to Uncle Billy unwatched and unmolested?"

He found, to his surprise, that the door was no barrier to his escape, for Hunt and Fleece had left it unlocked, and in a little while he was on the street again.

Suspicious of the actions of his employers, Lon resolved to return to his old quarters by a roundabout route, and at once set out with that intention.

"Heigho, there, Little Lon! You don't seem to be singing this morning! Can't you stop and give me a song, anyway?"

The street Nightingale came to a sudden halt, and cast a look upward.

In the second-story window of a frame house, he saw the pretty face of a young girl of perhaps seventeen. Her dark brown eyes sparkled with animation, and there was on her face a ripeness of complexion but seldom seen among the residents of the poor quarter of a great city.

The boy knew her at once, and hastened to return her greeting with suitable words:

"You're right, Natalie," said he. "I'm not singing just now. Indeed, I haven't got a tune in me this morning, and I won't have till after breakfast."

"Oh, if that is what shuts your song-box, let me open it," was the answer. "Come in, and we will see what we can do for you."

The invitation was at once accepted, and, a few minutes later, Little Lon was seated at a small table, to which the girl had wheeled a crippled mother in a chair.

"You have found out nothing about my fortune yet, I supposed?" asked the cripple, a sad-faced woman of forty though she looked much older.

"Nothing yet," answered Lon.

"I'm afraid it is lost forever and that Natalie will never be rich."

"Don't let that trouble you, mother," broke in the girl with a cheery laugh. "I'll get along without riches. Besides, the lost fortune may do some other poor people some good."

"No, Natalie. It benefits the guilty," spoke

the cripple. "It makes rich one of the wickedest men in the land. If Benjamin Brawn had his dues he wouldn't be rolling in wealth which justly belongs to you, my child."

Why did Little Lon draw suddenly back and look at the girl's mother? Why had the mention of the name startled him?

"Benjamin Brawn, hey?" thought the boy. "Why, Brawn is the name Uncle Bill found on the piece of coin I collected yesterday. Can this be the same man?"

He looked at Natalie's mother again, after another sip at his coffee.

"Where did this man live then?" he asked.

"In Chicago. He was not alone in the work, but his brain planned it. I was helpless and ignorant of the forms of law. He and another man came in and robbed me."

"Who was the other man?"

"I cannot say for certain. I never saw him and I heard his name but once. It was Condine."

"The dence—I mean the dickens—it was!" exclaimed the boy almost dropping his fork.

He thought of the desk he had despoiled a few hours before, and of the letter then in his pocket addressed to "Carlos Condine."

"You must ask me no questions even if I excite them," he replied with the gaze of Natalie and her mother riveted upon him. "I've got something very important in my head just now."

"About the lost property?" cried the cripple.

"No questions, I say," was the response. "Now let me think and act for a spell," and finishing his breakfast, he rushed from the house.

CHAPTER IV.

A LINK PICKED UP.

THE New York Nightingale did not go back to his fat master as he intended doing.

All at once he discovered that he was watched by a man with fox-like movements and very keen eyes.

Little Lon made the discovery by accident, and a short investigation told him that Mr. Hunt, of Hunt and Fleece, his new employers, was on his track.

"You don't trick me, Holly Hunt," smiled the boy to himself. "Already you made me pull some important chestnuts out of the fire for you, and I've committed a crime which might put me on the road to Sing Sing. Now you want to see where I live, but I guess you'll have to play a different hand to succeed."

The boy at once curtailed his journey and turned aside into Broadway.

The morning was fresh and clear, and the great artery of the city was already filled by the vast human tide which ebbs and flows there all day and far into the night.

"I'll treat you to an open-air concert if you'll come up, Mr. Hunt," resumed Lon, stealing a secret glance at the man whom he had discovered. "Won't come up, eh? Well, here goes, anyhow."

Stepping back to a large building the boy began to sing in a clear rich voice. In a moment he was recognized by those who had heard him before, and it was not long before he had an appreciative audience, by which he was rewarded with applause and a good many dimes.

In the midst of one of his ballads Little Lon caught sight of a plainly dressed man who had come up quietly, and who was listening with a smile of approval.

"Wait till I'm through, Mr. Kit," thought the boy while he sung. "You're just the very man I want to see. I've got something for you, and I think by putting our heads together, we can work up a pretty piece of rascality and mystery."

Man and boy exchanged looks of recognition unnoticed by the crowd, and when the Nightingale closed his concert he slipped over to the man's side.

Holly Hunt was not to be seen.

Whether that individual had given up the chase or had merely shifted his position and was still on the alert, Lon did not know; but the keenest scrutiny of the neighborhood failed to bring him to light.

"Mr. Kit," or rather Mr. Christopher, was one of the best general detectives of the city.

He was a man of many disguises and subtle plans for catching criminals, and he liked nothing better than to get first scent of a mystery.

"I think I've got another trail for you, Kit," said the boy, familiarly looking up into the eager blue eyes of the detective.

"Jove! I'm glad of that. I'm at my wits' ends for something exciting. Uncle Billy did not help you to the news, I presume?"

The city shadower was one of the few who

knew of the relations Little Lon sustained with the fat Shylock, but he had never given the secret away.

"Not this time," replied Lon. "I happened to find out for myself. Do you know anything about a burglary committed last night?"

Christopher, the shadow, shook his head.

"Let us go in here and pass through," continued the boy, turning suddenly into a cigar shop whose proprietor nodded with a smile, but did not arise to wait on the pair.

They passed through the shop to a door which the street singer opened and ushered the detective into a small room containing many boxes of tobacco and a settee.

"I want your head a little while, Kit," he resumed. "A boy can't do all the thinking there is to be done in this case. I may be operating somewhat against Uncle Billy, but I want to beat some sharp rascals who have dragged me into crime."

"Dragged you into crime?" echoed the detective.

"Yes; I committed a burglary last night."

Kit Christopher drew back, and stared at the boy.

"I don't understand," he exclaimed.

"There's a good deal about it that puzzles me," was the response, the boy smiling as he spoke.

He then proceeded to give the metropolitan shadow an account of his adventures since quitting his abode to answer the advertisement of Hunt and Fleece for a small boy.

The detective proved one of the best of listeners, and did not interrupt the narrative from the beginning to the close.

"That's a remarkable story, boy," said Christopher. "I never heard anything like it."

"And I never played in such a drama before," laughed Little Lon. "The idea of testing me for a burglary by having me force myself through a bottomless box!"

The two laughed together till the detective's countenance suddenly grew serious.

"What do you think was in the box you took from the desk?" he asked.

"Papers of some kind."

"Money?"

"I think not. Nobody in New York keeps money in that way."

"You are right, Lon. Your employers knew exactly what was in the box before they sent you down through the trap in the ceiling. It remains for us to discover whether the letter you found under the box and addressed to Carlos Condine was in its owner's possession at the time. Wait a moment."

Mr. Christopher stepped to the door opening into the cigar shop and returned with a Directory.

Finding the C's in a moment, Christopher ran his finger down a certain page.

"There is no Carlos Condine here," he remarked glancing up at the watchful lad.

"A new arrival perhaps," replied Lon.

The detective shut the book.

"We've got to go on a little hunt," smiled he.

"We want to know if the letter you found was in its owner's desk. By the way, you have not let me see it."

The street singer brought forth the document without delay and Christopher opened it after a brief inspection of the superscription.

"Hello!" he cried. "This was written in Chicago, three months ago."

"That's funny, Kit!"

"Why so, Lon?"

"Because Natalie's mother says she was deprived of her inheritance there by Brawn and Condine."

Kit Christopher returned to the letter which he read through without any outward sign that it was important.

"A letter written to Carlos Condine and signed 'B,'" he said, folding the document. "It is a singular letter, too, and I think I can read a word now and then between the lines. It refers to some past crime with which the recipient is in some way connected, and the knowledge of which the writer of the letter possesses. It intimates that Condine's garment fits well."

"Fits whom?" cried the boy.

"The man who got this letter, I should say."

"I see. Then you think that the man robbed last night is sailing under false colors?"

"It looks that way, but we must be sure of the trail as we go along."

With eyes filled with an excitement he could not suppress, Little Lon went over the purloined letter for the first time.

"I think you have found the first link, Mr. Kit," said he looking up.

"No, you found it," replied the detective. "I call it a missing link."

"A missing one?"

"Yes, Lon. Some years ago at the outset of my career I was concerned in a hunt for a man who was very badly wanted by the police of several cities. His name wasn't Condine either."

"Was it Brawn?" eagerly queried the Nightingale.

"Ah! what a guesser you are!" laughed the detective.

"We wanted Benjamin Brawn very badly then, and we wouldn't mind taking him yes. I shall take up the supposed clew and run it down. The man who lost the box last night may not have missed it up to this time. You will go back to Uncle Billy now, my boy. Tell him just as much as you think proper, and no more."

Little Lon promised and the two went out.

"I think Mr. Kit and I will get at the bottom of this affair," mentally exclaimed the boy. "I must keep clear of Hunt and Fleece or play a shrewd game if I do not. They are rascals who will stoop to any thing, and they are playing a game for big stakes. Some-how-or-other, I cannot but think that all this concerns Natalie's fortune. I must keep my head clear while Uncle Billy quizzes me. It is likely that our partnership will end before long. I'm going in with Mr. Kit."

Half an hour later, after many queer twistings and turnings among the streets of New York, Little Lon ran nimbly up the steps to his old lodgings and opened the door softly.

Putting his head inside, he opened his eyes wide on beholding the fat-faced Shylock fast asleep in his arm-chair.

"Not the prettiest picture in the world!" chuckled the boy while he remained in the doorway and contemplated the tableau before him. "You don't appear to welcome old friends, Uncle Billy, so I'll come back after awhile," and the Boy Nightingale shut the door as softly as he had opened it and left the fat man to his dreams.

CHAPTER V.

A DETECTIVE TRICK.

MR. KIT CHRISTOPHER, the detective, had, at the time of his interview with the young balladist a secret, which, as yet, he was not sharing with any one.

Always on the lookout for shadows criminal, he came across some strange trails, and, as a matter of course, made some accidental discoveries.

The reader has not forgotten the theft of Uncle Billy's letter from the corner mail-box, but it may surprise him to learn that the detective was the man who had so deftly abstracted it!

Such, indeed, is the fact.

The fat man, who took from Little Lon all the money he won by his marvelous voice, had fallen under suspicion long before the opening of our story, and Christopher had been keeping a sly watch on his movements.

It is probable that more than one letter of Uncle Billy's had found its way into Mr. Kit's possession before this particular one, but with them we have nothing to do.

"I think we have two links instead of one," observed the detective to himself, while he walked to his lodgings after the conversation in the cigar store. "I'm right glad I encountered Little Lon to-day, for he has given me some bits of news that are quite cheering. I can read Uncle Billy's letter over in a new light now, and I should not be surprised if it helped me forward a good ways."

The detective occupied very plain quarters on a street which branched off from Broadway, and he was soon there.

Unlocking a drawer, he drew forth a letter which had been torn open at one end, though the stamp had never been canceled.

"Uncle Billy writes to Chicago to learn what has become of the firm of Brawn and Borrow," said he, aloud, as if addressing some one. "He writes an adroit letter, too, but one can read between the lines and see that he wants to find Mr. Brawn, the senior partner. Now this letter would never be delivered, for Borrow is dead and Brawn is no longer in Chicago. It would come back to you, Uncle Billy, one of these days, and you would be but little wiser than you are now. Ha, ha, old fellow; you want to find Benjamin Brawn, don't you? You want to enrich yourself faster than Little Lon is doing it. You want to bleed some person, fat leech that you are! Why don't you try to live honestly, for don't you know that you're apt to die

suddenly—to go out like a candle in a gale? I give you fair warning now that I won't give you any mercy, Uncle Billy. Your little slave has been under your heel long enough. I'm going to emancipate Little Lon."

The detective read the letter over carefully like a person reads when he wants to fix anything in his mind, then he inclosed it in another envelope just like the one in which it had been mailed. After this he directed it in an exact imitation of Uncle Billy's handwriting, and went down-stairs and dropped it into a mail box.

One hour later the city detective, in a clever disguise which did not give the shrewdest the least clew to his identity, appeared in the neighborhood of 285 Blank street.

After awhile he walked slowly past the house and then back again.

"So this is the scene of the boy's burglary, is it?" he thought. "Everything is quiet enough here; doesn't look like the scene of a midnight crime. But one cannot judge by outside appearances. I believe I'll take a peep beyond."

Thereupon the detective walked up the front steps of No. 285 and rung the bell. The door was opened almost immediately by a young girl who looked closely at him, and waited for him to speak.

Detective Kit inquired if Mr. Carlos Condine was in. The girl hesitated and seemed about to say "no," when the caller continued that he was sure the gentleman would be glad to see him.

"Wait a moment," said the girl, and she tripped up-stairs and vanished.

"I'm inside anyway," smiled Kit to himself. "If Mr. Condine isn't at home to me, I'll go off like a gentleman and try again."

At that moment the girl reappeared, and from the middle of the flight invited the detective to walk up.

Prompt to obey an invitation of this sort, Kit marched off, and from the landing above the girl pointed to a door a few feet away and vanished again.

The detective pushed the door open and was face to face with the gentleman of the house.

Carlos Condine was a man of apparently fifty years of age. He was compactly built, broad across the shoulders, and the possessor of great strength. His face was well covered by an iron-gray beard over which looked a pair of observing eyes.

He was clothed for comfort in a linen suit, for the day was hot outside and the room, though somewhat darkened, not very cool.

He looked the detective over with care as his visitor bowed and came forward.

"Mr. Condine, I believe?" began Kit.

"Yes, sir," answered the other, taking a palm-leaf fan from the table at his elbow and working it.

"I am Julius Lamont, agent for the London firm of Lee & Lee, Solicitors, Finders of Lost Heirs, and so forth."

A smile came at once to the corners of Condine's mouth.

"Do I look like a lost heir, Mr. Lamont?" he asked.

"Probably not, sir," replied the detective unabashed, for he had played the role before with excellent success. "I happen to be looking for a person of your name."

"Condine?"

"Yes, sir."

The man seated in front of the detective seemed all attention at once.

Thus encouraged, Detective Kit proceeded with a cunning story of a lost heir of the name of Condine, who, if found, could establish his claim to a neat little estate in Southern England.

"I'm very sorry, sir, but I'm not the Condine you seem to be looking for," remarked the detective's auditor at the end of the story.

"No connection at all, you think?"

"I'm afraid not."

"You look like a rotund, jolly Britisher, Mr. Condine."

"I'm a full-blooded American," was the reply, "though one might be willing to have a little foreign blood in his veins to get a pull at a bag of sovereigns. By the way, I enjoy a cigar once in a while, and I think you do the same."

Carlos Condine crossed the room to a desk and threw back the lid.

He was closely watched by the detective, who took time to glance at the ceiling overhead.

If he saw anything there, he did not betray any symptoms of discovery, and immediately his eyes returned to Condine.

All at once the man at the desk was seen to start as if he had been confronted by an apparition.

"Ha! Just found it out, have you?" mentally

exclaimed the visitor. "You don't have many surprises of this kind, I'm thinking. You're indebted to Little Lon for this one, Mr. Condine, though you may never know it."

Carlos Condine at the desk was trying to recover his self-possession. It was a desperate struggle.

At length he wheeled and came toward the detective with several cigars in his hand.

"You do not have sudden spells of illness, I trust?" ventured Kit.

"No, but I am not very often robbed!"

"Robbed?" echoed the other, affecting astonishment. "Did you just discover your loss?"

Condine had dropped back into his chair and was breathing heavily.

"You saw me make the discovery," said he. "I would like to wring the neck of the thief, and I will one of these days. Help yourself, Mr. Lamont. The cigars are the best of Havanas—made especially for me in Cuba."

The detective took one of the proffered cigars and looked over it at Condine.

"I wish I could be of any service to you in this matter," said he. "I hope you have not suffered greatly at the hands of the villain."

"I can stand it," rejoined Condine, gritting his teeth.

"Was the desk locked?"

"No. I did not expect to be visited in this style. I have never been robbed before. Of course I do not keep money in a desk like that; but I have lost papers of great value."

He got pale again, took up a match, and threw it down unlighted.

Kit thought it time to withdraw.

"A shrewd detective might find a clew to the thief," he suggested.

"I don't like detectives—never did!" exclaimed Condine. "Some of them are no better than thieves," was the tart answer. "I can find the rascals without their aid. I think I know where to begin, and I'll make it hot for somebody."

It was not hard for Little Lon's friend to keep his temper while Carlos Condine lost his without much hope of its recovery.

He soon afterward left the house, with thanks for the audience granted, and, as he walked away, he laughed to himself over the victory he had scored.

"You think you know where to begin, eh, Mr. Condine?" he chuckled. "I doubt whether you know anything of the kind. You have no more right to the name you bear than I have, and your hands aren't as clean as you let on. Now, Little Lon and I will put our heads together again. I think we've struck it rich."

CHAPTER VI.

LITTLE LON IS STARTLED.

THE boy balladist—we might term him the young detective, because of several trails he had helped Kit Christopher to—did not return to Uncle Billy's quarters until that worthy had had time to have his sleep out.

"So you've got back, eh?" exclaimed the fat man in growling tones. "You must like your new employers. Aren't they clever fellows, Lon?"

The boy thought Hunt and Fleece very nice gentlemen, but he had not yet engaged himself to them.

"Not engaged?" cried Uncle Billy with a start, and a frown darkened his face. "In Jupiter's name, that's what I sent you there for. You were to enter their service by all means."

"But what if I didn't fill the bill?"

"Weren't you small enough?"

"I thought I was."

"Confound it all!" snapped the fat man. "I had counted on you getting in there. Well, you saw 'em, anyway?"

"I did."

"How do you like 'em?"

"As I've said, they appear to be nice fellows."

"Nice!" echoed Uncle Billy, in a voice which brought a smile to his lips. "I should say they were nice! I'm sorry you didn't get in there. Maybe they picked up a boy before you got there?"

"I don't know."

"I've got to get a grip on those fellows some other way," murmured the fluffy Shylock. "I can turn Lon to more uses than one. If I get favorable news from Chicago about the whereabouts of Benjamin Brawn, I'll make the boy appear in another role. I'm not the man to give a big stake up without an effort to rake it in."

"Look here, Uncle Billy!" suddenly put in the

boy, who sat opposite the fat man with his legs crossed and one knee in his hands. "I picked up a bit of paper on the street coming home. It seems to have been an address. You know nearly everybody. What can you say about this man with the curious name?"

Little Lon, as he finished, fished from the depths of his pocket a torn envelope, which he handed to his friend. The missing portion was that which had once held the street and city residence of the person to whom the envelope had been addressed, and all that was left was the name of "Carlos Condine, Esq."

Uncle Billy looked at it a moment, and then glanced up at the boy.

"Great Caesar! where did you get this?" he cried.

"I found it."

The man of flesh seemed to lose his breath for a moment.

"I thought you might know something about this Carlos Condine—"

"I do!" interrupted Uncle Billy, his eyes now aglow with excitement. "That is, I mean, I used to know Carlos Condine. Did you look at the Directory, boy?"

"I did not think it worth while."

"Because you happened to pick the envelope up, hey?"

"I guess that's it."

"I would like to see the letter it once held," continued Uncle Billy, and his voice betrayed his eagerness. "I'm not very rich, Lon, but I would give fifty dollars to hold the letter in my hands. You know where you found the envelope?"

"I could go right to the spot."

"But the man who lost it may not live within a mile of the place."

"The chances are that he does not."

"I think so."

"Was Carlos Condine—the one you knew, I mean—an old friend?" naively questioned the boy balladist.

Uncle Billy colored and then smiled.

"No, I can hardly call him that," said he. "I'd like to lay hands on him, though. There'd be something in it for us, Lon."

"Something big, Uncle Billy?"

"I think so."

The Boy Nightingale was silent for a moment.

"I'll keep my eyes open when I'm singing after this," was the reply. "I might be able to sight Mr. Condine if I only knew what he looked like."

"I'll photograph him as he looked when I saw him last," answered the fat man, and he proceeded forthwith to describe a man whom he said was Carlos Condine.

"I think I'd know him," observed the boy. "I'll look for him, anyhow."

Uncle Billy turned his revolving chair toward the nearest wall and unlocked a little drawer deftly set therein.

The young singer saw him take out and consult an old memorandum-book. He turned leaf after leaf in a vain search for something, and at last he put the book back and locked the drawer.

"It's the first time Uncle Billy has failed to get satisfaction out of his book," mentally observed the boy. "It's his refuge in case of need, and it nearly always helps him, too. But for once it has proved no good. I'm very sorry, Uncle Billy."

Not long afterward Little Lon arrayed in his street clothes stood before the fat man, on the eve of a singing tramp out into the city.

"Look out for Mr. Condine," admonished the fat man. "Remember that he carries a small scar over his left eye."

"I'll look for him, and if I don't see him it'll be because he doesn't come around."

Half-way down the dim steps leading to the sidewalk Little Lon halted and leaned against the wall.

"You're a shrewd one, Uncle Billy!" smiled he. "If Benjamin Brawn, late of Chicago, is Carlos Condine, as I know Kit Christopher thinks he is, no wonder you want to find him. You have another source of income besides my voice, old fellow. I haven't had my eyes shut about you only when I'm sound asleep. Woe to the person who drops into your clutches, Uncle Billy. You know how to bleed a man, and you also know just whom to bleed, too."

The boy ran on down-stairs and out into the street.

He made his way to one of his favorite singing stations, the Battery, now resplendent with electric light and thronging with people who sought relief from the heat of the close streets in the breezes that came in from the starlit bay. It was not long before Little Lon opened his

concert and had a motley crowd of pleased people for his audience.

Ballad after ballad he rattled off in his inimitable way, and, although the crowd was not a moneyed one, he received good pay for his efforts.

While he sung his eye roved carefully over the audience in a search for the man with a scar over his left eye.

There were a thousand chances against him finding Carlos Condine, but Lon took the solitary chance and looked on.

If he did not see the man with the scar, he saw some one else for all at once his eyes alighted on Mr. Holly Hunt, one of his employers!

The man stood apart from the main crowd, and did not appear to be much interested in the singing. When Lon had finished he turned and walked off.

He had not gone twenty yards ere he had Little Lon at his heels.

"A chance to pick up something," thought the street singer, keeping Hunt in sight. "Do you want another boy to squeeze himself through a ceiling trap and rob a desk? I think you obtained what you wanted, Mr. Hunt. Where's your partner? I don't see him."

Holly Hunt sauntered leisurely from the Battery and entered a street leading off from it toward the North River.

He did not go far till he ran up a flight of steps and vanished.

"This isn't D—street," ejaculated the boy, halting on the sidewalk at the door entered by the cunning man.

He waited more than an hour for Hunt to come forth, but he did not, and then the little shadow went away.

He made his way straight to D—street and up-stairs to the door of Room 8.

It was locked, and the light in the hallway was bright enough to show him a placard hanging above the knob.

It read:

"EMPTY—FOR RENT."

"Having made their haul, Hunt and Fleece have cleared out," decided Lon. "They are doubtless elsewhere, sailing under false colors. Did I not track Mr. Hunt to the new quarters awhile ago? It looks that way. But, I promised to see Natalie and her mother to-night, and I'll improve my time by going there now."

The young balladist took the shortest cut he knew to the humble house occupied by his friend Natalie and her crippled relative, and in a little while he was in their presence.

The woman's face beamed with pleasure at sight of him, and her eyes sparkled as she leaned forward and caught his arm.

"I want to tell you something!" she cried. "A street car broke down in front of our house to-day, and all the passengers were compelled to alight. I was sitting at the window in my chair and saw it all. Among them was a man who caused a chill to run through me. I hadn't seen him for years. He came to our house in Chicago once, with Benjamin Brawn, who robbed me of my fortune. He was a fat little man with a terribly pitted face, and was dressed in light gray."

Little Lon fell back with wonder in his eyes. "That is Uncle Billy!" he cried.

CHAPTER VII.

A SAMPSON IN MINIATURE.

NATALIE'S mother was positive that she had established the identity of the man who years before had been an associate of the man who had deprived her of her inheritance, and thus forced Natalie and herself to subsist in absolute poverty in the heart of the great city.

Little Lon—more detective from now on than street ballad singer—saw Uncle Billy, the fat Shylock, in a new light.

No wonder he was anxious to find the trail of Benjamin Brawn and Carlos Condine! He had a scheme in his head if he could but find his old associates, and the shrewd boy, always good at solving puzzles, thought he could see what it was.

Did Uncle Billy want to blackmail Benjamin Brawn if he could find him in prosperous circumstances? Ah! it looked that way.

Little Lon left crippled Mrs. Nestor and her daughter to find Kit, the detective.

He was eager to meet the detective again, to tell him what he had discovered about Hunt and Fleece's removal and to talk about the discoveries resulting from the accident to the street car.

He did not know that, observant though he was, he was seen to emerge from Natalie's home by a man over whose fox-like face a smile spread.

"Not a fool by any means," exclaimed this individual putting himself quietly on the boy's trail. "He can do more things than crawl through a box, and the best we can do with him is to put him out of the way. We've got the clamps ready for the gentleman who thinks everything serene, and all we have to do now is to open the doors and let the money flow in."

Lon was followed furtively by the man while he talked thus to himself.

He went almost direct to the detective's lodgings, but Detective Kit did not happen to be at home.

The man who had dogged the boy was not idle while Little Lon was in the house. He made several adroit inquiries on the sidewalk and learned that one of the occupants of the house was the independent detective who had several times of late been seen with the boy.

This seemed enough to satisfy the man.

Having obtained this information, he waited for Lon's reappearance with more eagerness than before.

After waiting an hour for Kit's return without results, the young detective resolved to seek him elsewhere.

To this end leaving a note in the room telling him that he had called at a certain hour and would call again before long, he went down on the street and reappeared to the patient watcher there.

Away went Little Lon with the city fox at his heels.

The boy turned toward the river, so did the man.

Little Lon kept on as if he were going to the piers themselves.

"Confound him! whither is he taking me?" growled the man, beginning to tire of the long chase. "If he turns at the next corner I will be on ground perfectly familiar, and near a trap whose keeper I can trust."

Sure enough, the young trailer wheeled to the right at the next cross-street, and when his pursuer reached the corner he was a few steps away.

All at once the man after Lon uttered a sharp cry and threw up his hands.

The boy heard and stopped.

In a second the man had fallen face downward, and Little Lon was running toward him with the thought of help uppermost in his mind.

Not another soul was in sight at the time, and the boy's footsteps gave out the only sounds that rose from the sidewalk.

He found the fallen man at the mouth of a narrow alley from which came nothing but darkness.

"What crime is this?" exclaimed Lon, stooping over the man. "I heard no shot, yet this person uttered a cry and fell."

He tried to raise the stranger's head so as to see whether a sign of life remained, but it was a task.

Suddenly the person prostrate on the pavement sprang up, and Little Lon found himself in the grip of a pair of hands which closed like spring-worked vises!

"Not a word, young ferret!" was hissed in his ear. "Open your head and you'll never sing another song. Come with me and keep a still tongue in your mouth. Silence means life here!"

The boy balladist was too astounded to speak, even if he had thought of doing so.

He obeyed the man and held his tongue.

Still holding Lon's arm, the fellow started for the alley, and in another moment both man and boy were in its depths, swallowed up in the darkness as it were.

All this had been accomplished in so short a time that Little Lon had not caught a glimpse of his captor's face, and of course such a glimpse was not to be had in the alley.

"I don't see why they've nabbed me," passed through the little detective's mind. "I think I've been tracked some distance by this man, and I've allowed myself to fall into a neat trap besides."

He was not kept long amid the gloom of the alley, for a few yards from the street he was dragged up to a door which was speedily opened and he was taken into a house.

"Sit down!" commanded Lon's captor, at the same time pushing him down into a chair in a room dimly revealed by a single gas jet burning against the wall.

Then for the first time the boy saw the man's face.

"Ho!" he cried. "It is you is it, Mr. Fleece?"

"What does he call you?" laughed a little man, wrinkled and ugly, who had admitted the pair.

"Never mind what," was the answer. "My name isn't Fleece no more than it's George Washington. Is it, Sampson?"

Little Lon had to smile at the idea of calling the little dried-up man Sampson, though he was soon to retract his merriment.

"No, you're not Fleece," was the ogre's response.

"Who am I?"

"You are Mr. Catchem," grinned the little man with a lavish display of toothless gums.

"A good name, by jolly! for he's caught me!" cried the boy.

"Silence!" said the man of tricks leaning toward Lon. "You'll know some things you don't know now after you've kept Sampson company a while."

He turned to the wrinkled man and went on:

"I want you to take care of this bird," he pointed at Lon while he spoke. "He may prove a little troublesome, but you know how to discipline him. I'll see you to-morrow, when I shall issue further and final instructions. He played nicely into the snare to-night, Sampson. It would have delighted your eyes to have seen it. Now, do your duty."

Little Lon's eyes followed the speaker—surely Fleece, of Hunt and Fleece—as he departed, and in a moment he was alone with his jailer.

Sudden as this transition from liberty to captivity was, the boy realized the change in all its phases.

He knew that he had been tracked by one of the men who had forced him to commit the burglary of the desk, and he could not but feel that they would stoop to anything to silence him.

Sampson stood off awhile and watched him with a pair of deeply-sunken and serpentine eyes.

"The man is like his master," mentally concluded the boy. "I don't intend to remain here long if the old guard gives me a chance for a break. I want to see Kit now more than ever. I've got another link for the chain. It fits exactly the one he picked up awhile ago."

At this juncture Sampson came toward Lon with the slouching and noiseless tread of a panther.

"You'll like it here when you get acquainted," said he to the boy. "I've got much to show you in this house. You may know a good deal about New York, but I'll warrant that you never heard of Sampson and his pets."

"I'll admit that," answered the young detective. "Until to-night I did not know you had a being. As for your pets, of course I don't know anything about them. I do know, though, that you have no right to keep me here."

"Never mind that; you are here, and that's enough!" laughed Sampson. "Besides, I obey orders to the letter. My pets are nice ones sure enough. You shall see them directly, ha, ha, ha!"

The little man walked across the room and opened the door through which the boy had been dragged by his captor.

Lon noticed that it was not tightly closed.

"Why not now?" he thought. "Beyond that door runs a hall to the street. The old fellow is already in another part of the house. I hear him there."

For the boy detective to think thus was to act.

He left his chair and ran across the floor. In a second he had passed the door and was in the hall beyond.

His heart was in his throat, but his frame was all nerve.

Down the hall he sprang, but half-way to the front door he was caught in the darkness and lifted from the floor as if he were as light as a feather!

Lon made a desperate struggle to break from the grip that held like pinchers of steel, but he was hurried back to the room from whence he had escaped and forced into the same chair.

Until he was back into the light it would have been difficult for Lon to have thought that he was not in the clutches of a veritable Hercules, and a look of mingled surprise and chagrin overspread his face when he found that his assailant was the little ogre of ugliness, Sampson.

"You don't get away from Sampson, boy!" laughed the dwarf. "He is strong enough to handle his pets, and he ought to be able to take care of you."

"I'm afraid he speaks the truth," murmured Lon.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TERRIBLE GUARD.

HELD down in the chair as he was by the merciless hands of Sampson, the boy balladist

could not move. He was in the tightest box of his life, and at that moment would have given the next thing to life itself to have been elsewhere.

"The villain must have been waiting for me in the hall," said Lon to himself. "He wanted to show his strength and his authority, and I gave him the desired opportunity. Maybe my time will come before long. Then won't I get even with a vengeance? Ah, won't I?"

After awhile, Sampson drew off and folded his arms on his breast.

Then for several minutes he eyed his prisoner with the ferocity of a tiger, and when this was done, he sprang back and vanished.

"What is next on the programme?" thought the boy. "Is he going to introduce me to his pets? I don't want to see them if they are anything like him."

In a moment he heard several strange calls beyond the door, and all at once Sampson reappeared leading by their collars two immense leopards that seemed eager to break their leash and spring forward.

Little Lon was almost lifted from his chair by the sight, for it was the last one looked for under a roof in New York.

"This is Death!" laughed Sampson, shaking the animal on his right till he showed his teeth and growled. "Death is twin brother to Terror," and he pushed the second leopard forward. "These are not all the pets I keep, but they will show the boy that he is as safe a prisoner here as he would be in the Tombs."

The boy was willing to admit this. He looked at the beasts and then at their master.

"Who would have thought that I could have fallen into a trap like this?" he exclaimed.

"Mr. Fleece the adroit rascal knew just where to take me, for he is acquainted with Sampson and his villainies."

"Go up and look at him, dogs," said Sampson, and forthwith the leopards dropped upon their bellies and began to crawl toward the boy, with their eyes fastened on him with fire in their depths.

Nearer and nearer came the twin leopards, and as Little Lon drew back in his chair he saw a grin overspread Sampson's face.

It was not long before the beasts were crouching at his very feet.

"Death and Terror! they are fitly named," murmured the young detective. "If Mr. Kit could know my situation, he would play a hand of some kind at the risk of his life, but of course he knows nothing of this."

"They'll keep you company," suddenly said Sampson to the boy. "I think you will become friends before you separate. At any rate, I'll give you a chance to become acquainted."

Lon, the Nightingale, saw Sampson move off with a final look of command at the leopards, and the next minute he was alone with the spotted twins.

They continued to crouch at his feet, keeping him confined to the chair, from which he dared not move on account of them.

They were strikingly alike; the spots of one seemed to be duplicated on the other, and there was not a particle of difference in their size.

At last the boy leaned forward and spoke to his jailers.

Their eyes continued to stare at him, and their claws played in and out of the velvet like mice.

When he put one foot down as if he was about to leave the chair the leopards raised their heads, and moved forward another inch. The boy knew what this meant.

"I can't avoid these guards," said Sampson's prisoner. "If I left my chair I would be attacked by both leopards and torn to pieces. I must submit."

Once more he fell back to wait for the next event.

He had heard nothing of Sampson for some time. Had the old fellow left the house?

At length one of the leopards left his place and slouched across the room to the door where he stretched his spotted length and hid his head between his paws—all but his sleepless eyes.

His example was soon followed by his comrade and the boy was permitted to stretch his cramped limbs. He was still watched as before and with the same unceasing vigilance though it did not seem so strong.

More than an hour passed away thus.

Little Lon was beginning to believe that Sampson had left the house to him and the leopards when the noise of the closing of a door came to his ears.

The spotted twins raised their heads and listened.

In a minute they fell back as the door opened

and Sampson, their master, stood before them. He was not alone.

There stood alongside the little man a person whose head was far above his. He was well-dressed, wore black gloves and a mask, which fell to his chin.

"That is my guest," laughed Sampson, looking up into his companion's eyes. "You see I left him in good company. Ah! do not be afraid of my pets. They are as harmless as kittens when I want them to be so."

"Take them out," said the mask in tones of command. "I don't trust the treacherous things. Remove them as soon as possible. I want to talk to the boy."

Sampson turned and whistled peculiarly to the leopards. In an instant they were on their feet, and the boy in the chair drew a breath of relief when he saw them march out with their master.

The stranger shut the door with a backward motion and came forward, his eyes riveted on the young detective who in turn was looking closely at him.

"Who brought you here?" he asked.

"An enemy, of course," was the prompt reply. "Do you think I would come into this den of wild beasts of my own accord?"

"I hardly think you would, boy. Did you know your captor?"

"I call him Mr. Fleece."

"But you don't know me."

There was a tinge of curiosity in the speaker's voice.

Little Lon, the balled-singer, smiled while he looked up into his eyes.

"Yes, I know you, too," said he.

The man fell back a little.

"Well, name me, boy. I'd like to know how well you can guess."

"I don't think it would be guessing. You are Holly Hunt. Ah! you can't disguise your voice, though you may hide your face behind a mask."

There was no confirmation of Lon's words, but he knew that the shot had gone straight to the mark, and that he was looking at Mr. Holly Hunt, of the notorious firm of Hunt & Fleece.

"You don't keep your word," suddenly continued the man.

"When have I broken it?"

"Never mind that. I want some information."

The young street singer said to himself:

"Well, get it if you can!"

"Look here, boy," continued the man.

"Whom have you been with lately?"

There was no reply.

"Do you want Sampson's spotted cats called back?" cried the mask.

"That is for you to say," calmly answered Lon.

"You have been with a detective, haven't you, boy?" persisted the man.

"What if I have?" flashed the young detective. "I would like to know when Mr. Holly Hunt or any other man got the right to choose my friends for me."

The skin beneath the mask grew livid; the man had suddenly crimsoned with rage.

"You have been with a person called Mr. Kit, though that is not exactly his name," he went on. "You told him all that has taken place within the last twenty-four hours."

A triumphant look overspread the boy's face despite his situation and the odds against him.

"Is he going to take the trail?" asked the man.

"What trail?"

Mr. Holly Hunt seemed nonplused.

He dared not answer, as though a reply would have been confession.

"You told him enough anyway," he exclaimed at last. "I've a mind to wring your neck for your cuteness, here and now."

"Do you think the operation would benefit you in the long run, Mr. Hunt?" queried Lon, a singular twinkle in his eyes as he leaned back in the chair and eyed his old employer. "I fancy that you would still find Mr. Kit in the game and with more vim than ever. You did not think, I hope, that I was going to play burglar all the time for you and your partner."

"What did I tell you about betraying us?"

"I don't remember."

"Well, you were told that you would never sing again on the street!"

"Oh! I believe you did make a threat of that kind," rejoined Lon.

"Well, you have betrayed us."

"I have given Mr. Kit a clew to one of the deepest and meanest schemes I ever heard of, and if that is treachery to you—"

"It is nothing else, you young rascal!" broke in the man, and the following moment he sprang at the boy and shook him till he seemed to loosen every tooth in his head.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. KIT ON THE TRAIL.

MR. KIT, the detective, was sure he had struck a rich vein of luck by his visit to Carlos Condine, whom Little Lon had robbed at the instigation and threats of Hunt and Fleece. He did not doubt that the man was sailing under false colors, and he was almost ready to believe that he was the famous Benjamin Brawn himself.

Certain well directed inquiries convinced the detective that Carlos Condine had a great deal of money at his command, and that he could afford to take life easy, as he was doing at the time of the robbery.

Somehow or other, Hunt and Fleece—whose names did not belie their calling—had discovered that Condine could be blackmailed if they could get possession of certain papers, and as there was but one way to get to the treasure, they had advertised for a boy small and agile enough to accomplish their purpose.

All this the detective reasoned out when he found himself back at his lodgings after his visit to Carlos Condine.

He knew something about Little Lon's friends, the Nestors, but he had never heard from their lips the story of their wrongs. The boy singer had talked so much about Natalie and a young lover whom she had that he had become interested in the pair, and now that the trail he was on seemed to lead him to the wrong by which the poor family had been defrauded, he was more than ever eager to bring the guilty to justice.

Of course he knew nothing of the misfortunes which had befallen his young friend Lon. While he knew the meanness of Hunt and Fleece, he thought the boy able to take care of himself.

Sampson and his pets were well known to the detective but he did not dream that the boy balladist had fallen into their power.

If he had there would have been a rescue before Lon had been long in the disgusting den.

It was not long after his visit to Carlos Condine that the detective climbed the stair leading to the Nestor lodging.

He found mother and daughter surprised though glad to see him, and Natalie, with a blush, introduced a plainly-dressed but handsome young man named Roy.

Her actions told Mr. Kit that the youth was an accepted lover, and this was confirmed by Mrs. Nestor saying that there were no secrets between the three.

"Mrs. Nestor," said the detective, "I don't like to bring up unpleasant memories in your mind, but I want the whole story of your wrongs."

A cloud passed over the pale face of the crippled woman who always occupied her wheeled chair.

"I don't mind telling it," she replied. "I saw only a short time ago a certain man who used to come to my house in Chicago. He was forced to alight in the street by an accident to the street car, and I had a good view of him. When I described him to Lon he exclaimed that the man was Uncle Billy—his friend and employer. But you want my story, Mr. Christopher. Well, here it is."

It is not our intention to burden the reader with Mrs. Nestor's narrative of wrong.

She told the listening detective how her husband had first been deceived by the designing scoundrels; how, after his death, a fortune which rightfully belonged to her and Natalie was taken from her by the same men, and how they had been induced to come to New York by a subtle letter which held forth illusive and deceptive hopes of final success.

Natalie's friend Roy listened to this story with almost breathless interest. He had never heard it before in complete detail, for Mrs. Nestor who knew Christopher's calling did not skip the minutest particular.

At Mr. Kit's request the widow described both Benjamin Brawn and his friend Condine, the men who had defrauded her out of the estate.

The detective smiled while she talked.

"I was right," he said to himself. "Benjamin Brawn has changed his name; that is, he has taken the name of his old partner, and Messrs. Hunt and Fleece know it, too. I may find out by-and-by what became of Mr. Condine, though I think I have an idea already. This is a pretty game, sure enough."

"I have seen Mr. Condine," suddenly put in Roy who had been waiting for a chance to

say something. "He doesn't go out much, but now and then he takes a walk. Always after dark, too."

"Whither does he go?" asked the detective.

"Hardly ever is his walk extended over four squares," was the reply.

"Did you ever follow him?"

"Once or twice."

"Why, Mr. Roy?"

The young man flushed.

"Well, I suppose it was because I thought he bore a resemblance to a certain man whom I have often heard Mrs. Nestor describe."

"Mr. Condine, eh?"

"No—Benjamin Brawn, the leader in the conspiracy to defraud my friends."

The detective made no reply.

"Carlos Condine is said to be very rich," continued Natalie's lover.

"By whom?"

"By his neighbors."

"How could they know if he keeps so secluded?"

"Neighbors will talk, you know," put in Mrs. Nestor with a smile.

"Mother," said Natalie suddenly, "why don't you show Mr. Christopher the letter you found yesterday?"

"It is hardly worth while," answered the widow. "It is an old letter, and I did not know we had brought it to New York. It was written to me by the man who sometimes came to our house with the men, Condine and Brawn—the man I had not seen for a long time until he left the street car in front of the house as I have told you."

Mr. Kit intimated that he would like to see the letter if it was not of too private a nature, and Mrs. Nestor directed Natalie to get it at once.

A glance at the handwriting brightened Mr. Kit's face again.

"You are right," said he with a look into the woman's anxious face. "You saw the author of this letter alight from the car."

"What! Little Lon's Uncle Billy?" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Then you know his handwriting?"

"I have seen it," responded the detective guardedly, and at the same time his thoughts went back to the letter he had abstracted from the corner letter-box.

"Keep this for future reference," he resumed handing the letter back to Natalie's mother. "It has been of some service to me already and may be of more in the future."

"It seemed to astonish the Boy Nightingale that Uncle Billy had been seen so far from home," said Mrs. Nestor.

"No doubt of that. His weight makes a poor pedestrian out of him, and he sticks close to his lodgings leaving Lon to support him by his marvelous voice."

"The boy ought not to be the old fellow's slave."

"That is true, madam, and I think I am safe in saying that the day of emancipation is near at hand," smiled Mr. Kit.

Shortly afterward the detective left the little group and went down on the street.

He looked like a person who after toiling over a puzzle a long time was about to get out of the maze.

"I cannot help but think how this Benjamin Brawn has eluded us so long," he murmured. "Here, Carlos Condine has been living under our very noses, as it were, and no one has suspected him till Little Lon gives me a clue. Now Hunt and Fleece robbed Condine for the purpose of blackmailing him, and if I am not mistaken, every dollar they squeeze from him belongs to Mrs. Nestor and Natalie. He told me that he doesn't like detectives; well, I should think not if he is the man I think he is. And, whether he knows it or not, I am the last person of that kind whom he wants in his employ."

The New York detective ended with a light laugh as he walked rapidly away, and before long he was looking up at a window at which sat a thick figure which he knew belonged to Uncle Billy.

For some time Mr. Kit studied the man closely, then he moved closer and got a better view.

"I would like to know if Lon has made any report since I saw him last," thought the detective. "Ha! Uncle Billy thinks he has given me the proper amount of inspection, therefore he vanishes like a jack-in-the-box."

There was no one at the window, but the detective did not quit his post.

All at once the fat figure of the street singer's

employer appeared in the mouth of the hallway at the foot of the stairs.

Mr. Kit had a good position and did not stir.

After a while Uncle Billy moved out of the house and wobbled off.

A few yards away he hailed a passing car and deposited his dumpy body in one corner, completely filling it.

"Is it a lark or business, Uncle Billy?" asked the detective of himself as he planted his feet on the rear platform of the car and prepared to shadow the fat man to his destination.

CHAPTER X.

UNCLE BILLY'S SCHEME.

IF Uncle Billy, at ease in his corner, had used his eyes to advantage, he might have caught at least a glimpse of the man on his trail.

Perhaps he did see Mr. Kit, the detective, but not knowing him from any other mortal, he may not have thought him worth watching.

The car rolled on and at length turned into the street on which the Nestors lived.

The detective began to wonder if the fat man was going to pay the little family a visit at that hour, but he was not left long in a maze.

When the car reached a point opposite the house, Uncle Billy jerked the bell-cord with an effort and waddled to the door.

He nearly pushed Mr. Kit from the platform as he left the car, which, starting up immediately after it had unloaded him, took the spotter away.

But Mr. Kit was not to lose his prey in this manner; therefore, he soon left the car and turned back, which he did in time to see Uncle Billy disappear in the hall leading up to the Nestors' room.

"What on earth is the old fellow after?" exclaimed the detective.

If he could have followed close at the fat man's heels he would have seen him rap on a certain door with his plump knuckles.

The knocking was soon answered and as the door was opened by a young girl Uncle Billy pushed forward and got across the threshold before he could be invited inside.

"Aha! good-night. Pardon me for this late call," said he, removing his hat and looking at a woman who occupied a chair made especially for cripples.

"You are already pardoned, sir," answered the woman, whose face had undergone a singular transformation since his entrance. "But I was not looking for you."

"No, I presume not," smiled Uncle Billy, who had already deposited himself upon the first unoccupied chair. "I—I think you know me; he, he, Mrs. Nestor."

"Yes, I recognize you," said Natalie's mother, and the thoughts brought up by that recognition seemed to be unpleasant ones. "If you are ready to give me some information, I am glad you have come."

It was Uncle Billy's time to start.

"I have information for you!" he exclaimed, and then his gaze became fixed on Natalie in an impertinent way. "Is this your daughter, Mrs. Nestor?"

"That is Natalie. You have seen her before, though she was small then."

"I—I believe I do remember seeing a child about the house."

"She became quite fond of you."

Natalie smiled at the thought of her having once been "fond" of the pitted fat man who covered the entire chair, and who, in his present condition, was about the last object for a young girl's affectionate regard.

Uncle Billy did not blush at the allusion, but stared at Natalie more impertinently than ever.

Perhaps he was wondering if she could ever become fond of him again.

"Mrs. Nestor, since you have recognized me so readily despite the lapse of time," said he, turning abruptly toward the mother, "I am going to say candidly that I believe I can serve you—and Natalie."

"I hope you can and will," responded the cripple. "You can see that we did not always occupy a lodging like this. You know—"

"Yes, I know," put in the fat man. "How long have you lived here?"

"In this house?"

"Yes."

"Six years."

"Did you come direct to this city from the West?"

"We did."

"At whose solicitation, if anybody's, Mrs. Nestor?"

"We got a letter urging us to come," and the woman eyed the fat man sharply.

His gaze fell beneath her look.

"Yes, we got an urgent letter," continued the cripple. "It told us that our wrongs could be righted here, that the men, Benjamin Brawn and his partner, who had cheated us, could be made to disgorge. That is why we came to New York, Mr. Barlow."

Uncle Billy started just a little at the name applied to him by Mrs. Nestor. It was not the name by which he was known to the City Directory, and to hear it spoken aloud by another, created a peculiar sensation.

"Well, the matter was never adjusted, I presume," said he.

"It was not. We fell among strangers on our arrival here, and having nothing left, we were compelled to remain homeless and friendless in the great city. What became of those two men?"

"Do you refer to—to?"

"Benjamin Brawn and his friend, Condine!" said Mrs. Nestor, with some bitterness.

Uncle Billy shook his head.

"You do not know?" she went on.

"I have not heard of either for years," said he, solemnly. "But," he moved his chair closer to the invalid's chair, and with another glance at Natalie, dropped his voice almost to a whisper: "but, for all this, I think I can serve you and your daughter."

There was something suspicious about the very manner of this oily rascal.

Natalie had already thought that he was the person who sent Little Lon out upon the streets of New York, and then greedily pocketed every cent of his earnings.

She already hated Uncle Billy, and, in her eyes, he was a bloated spider, and the boy was but a fly in his web.

"Very well, Natalie and I are ready to be served," replied Mrs. Nestor, with a smile.

Uncle Billy crossed his legs near the feet and coughed once or twice to get confidence in himself. Then he bent his body forward and laid the tips of his fingers on the edge of Mrs. Nestor's chair.

"What would you agree to give me if I got it back for you?" he asked.

The widow caught his question with a look of surprise.

"If you got what back?" she exclaimed.

"Why, the—the fortune?"

"The money which those men took from me by the lowest of tricks?"

"They didn't do right, that's a fact," admitted Uncle Billy. "Yes, what will you give me if I get a big share of it back for you?"

"Can you do it?"

The fat man put on an important air, and passed his hand through his hair several times before he answered.

"I'm a pretty good ferret if I don't get around like an acrobat," he grinned. "I haven't been asleep all these years, and I think I am able to put my hand on a streak of luck for you and your daughter."

"I have nothing to give," was the reply.

"Nothing?" echoed Uncle Billy looking out of the corner of his eye at Natalie who happened at that moment to be paying strict attention to the conversation.

"You see our surroundings. They are simple and speak for themselves."

"But you would like to have the tables turned, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, for Natalie's sake."

"I thought so," laughed the fat man. "You wouldn't be a true mother if you did not have such feelings. Well, you can amply reward me for my pains."

"I don't see how, Mr. Barlow."

Again Natalie caught his eye in the same sort of glance he had given her before, and in an instant she flushed to the temples.

"You have a fine daughter there," continued Little Lon's employer boldly. "She's old enough to make somebody a good wife and—"

There was a sudden interruption from Natalie herself.

She stepped toward the fat man and he saw a flash in her eyes before she spoke a word.

He fell back in his chair and looked at her.

"We can get along without the stolen fortune, sir," exclaimed the girl who had halted before Uncle Billy.

"I see the drift of your proposition if mother does not and at the outset I say no! You came to the wrong roof to get a wife by offering to restore that which was wrongfully taken from us years ago, and by men with whom you associated at the time! We are content to remain in poverty—I am at least. It is no disgrace though it has many trials and sorrows. You need not proceed with your proposition. I don't believe you are in a position to restore one dollar of the

stolen fortune. We have heard from you before, and that within the last few hours."

It was some moments before Uncle Billy got his breath.

He changed color several times under Natalie's look and scathing sentences and when she finished with a glance at her astonished mother he had nothing to say for a spell.

"Your daughter has a tongue of her own," said Uncle Billy at last turning to Mrs. Nestor. "She is liable to mix matters considerably by her haste, for I hold the welfare of that fortune in my hands."

The last words were full of threatening, and the fat man uttered them with rising ire.

"We don't fear your threats," answered Natalie. "Besides, a man who comes with a proposition as base as yours has only his own interests at heart. Yonder is the door, William Barlow. I speak for both of us when I say that we trust we have seen you for the last time!"

Quivering with rage and yet afraid to break out into a display of it, Uncle Billy seized his hat and crossed the room facing Natalie.

"You'll never see a dollar of it now!" he cried. "The fortune is lost forever, and you will curse the hour that witnessed your decision!"

"I will risk the curse with pleasure, sir," laughed the girl.

The next moment Uncle Billy left the room, and as he turned away he fell over something in the hall.

He tried to catch himself but failed, and down the stair he rolled, cleverly tripped by the foot of Mr. Kit, the detective.

CHAPTER XI.

GETTING OUT.

THE fat rascal picked himself up at the bottom of the flight in no good humor. He did not know what to make of his sudden descent, but from the mad looks he sent upward it was evident that he was inclined to attribute it to human agency.

"The girl's a regular stormer, ain't she?" ejaculated Uncle Billy. "I didn't expect to run against a snag o' that sort. But I'll bring her to time yet for I've got to get my hands fairly on the two before I play my cards for the pile."

He walked away not very much the worse for his fall and took the first car he could.

When he reached his lodgings he was surprised to find there no signs of Little Lon's return, and the fat man wondered what had become of his *protege*.

He knew nothing of the misfortunes that had overtaken the boy, nothing about his enforced captivity in Sampson's den, nor of the visit of Holly Hunt, in whose clutch we left Little Lon a short time ago.

After the severe shaking which he received at the hands of this adroit villain, Lon was suddenly left to himself.

The spotted pets belonging to the proprietor of the house were not readmitted to watch him as before, and Sampson himself did not come back.

"I want to get out of here. I must!" exclaimed the boy. "Between the scoundrels Hunt and Fleece and Sampson and his pets I am in a dangerous position. I want to see Mr. Kit, and give him another link. It is all a play for Mrs. Nestor's fortune. I see that now. Carlos Condine is living on wealth not his own and if we can show that he is one of the scamps who got the fortune we will have the game nearly won. Here goes for liberty if it is to be obtained."

Little Lon knew nothing concerning the interior arrangement of the den in which he was confined. There was no telling what would confront him beyond the room should he ever get that far. Sampson might have other "pets" as dangerous as the twin leopards, and then the ogre jailer was a dangerous man himself.

But these things were not going to deter the Boy Nightingale of Gotham.

He went to the door beyond which Holly Hunt had disappeared, but it was locked. Then he turned back to the windows and found that they were provided with heavy shutters which seemed to shut off all escape in that direction.

Little Lon reached the light that burned in the room and turned it almost out.

"It is now or never!" said he. "I am going to help Mr. Kit beat the conspiracy against Natalie and her mother, I don't care what sort of trap they shut me up in."

Abandoning all hope of getting out by the door the little prisoner returned to the window.

He took out his penknife and began with one of the panes.

Beyond it were the heavy shutters which he wanted to reach.

It took him some minutes to cut out the pane for the putty was hard and stubborn, but perseverance and a good blade accomplished the task.

Little Lon thrust his hands through the opening and eagerly seized the rusty button that held the shutters.

It required all his strength to move it, and when he succeeded, he could hardly suppress an exclamation of joy. Next he opened one of the shutters and saw the dark street beyond.

He was glad it was dark, for the exit he hoped to make was not so apt to be discovered.

The next task on hand was to squeeze himself through the opening in the window. It looked smaller than the trap-door through which he had forced himself into Carlos Condine's private room, but in his eagerness to escape, he considered himself equal to the emergency.

The boy singer forced his shoulders through the square, and then began the tug of war.

When midway through, to his horror he stuck.

Despite his utmost efforts, he could make no progress either way; he was as effectually imprisoned in the window as though the frame had been built around him.

Little Lon feared that Sampson and his leopards were apt to come back to the room at any moment, and the thought of being dragged from his uncomfortable position by the animals, was anything but a pleasant one to the boy.

The house seemed to occupy a place on the street that was not frequented at that time of night.

Not a footstep came near the young balladist, no one to whom he could appeal for help.

Seconds seemed minutes to the boy, and the minutes appeared to stretch themselves into hours.

The more he struggled to free himself the less bright his chances seemed.

At last a footstep came toward the house.

It echoed strangely on the deserted street, and the boy strained his eyes to catch a glimpse of the pedestrian, so anxious was he to see if he was a person whom he could trust.

At length Little Lon saw the figure of a man—a patrolman.

Where had he been all the time?

As the burly figure of the policeman drew near, the imprisoned boy made a sound which attracted his attention.

In another second the man was leaning toward the window.

"What's this?—one o' old Sampson's pets dead in his window?" he exclaimed, drawing back for an instant at first sight of Lon.

"I don't think I'm a leopard just yet," smiled the boy.

The policeman gave vent to a cry of surprise, but quickly mastering himself he came up and stared at the victim of the trap.

"Who are you, and what on earth are you doin' here?" he queried.

"Pull me out first and keep your questions for another time."

"It looks like burglary."

"What do you think I'd be after in this den—one of the spotted cats?" rejoined Lon.

"By my soul, no!" exclaimed the patrolman.

"Then, pull me out, and be quick about it if you please. I would sooner have a policeman at my head than a lot of leopards at my heels."

"An' so would I, boy."

The following moment the man on the sidewalk got a good grip on Little Lon's shoulders, and in a little while he was pulling him through the square.

It was slow progress even then, for the window was unyielding, but by dint of hard work he was at last dragged forth, and he dropped to the sidewalk still in the grip of his rescuer.

Lon looked back at the old house with triumphant eyes and a keen sense of relief.

"Are you sure you were not playing the burglar act?" asked the policeman, reluctant to let him go, and anxious to have the praise of making an important arrest.

"Of course I am. Do I look like a burglar, and would I have called on a cop for help if I was?"

"There's a good deal in that," was the response.

"I went into that house against my will, and I was trying to get out with my full consent," continued Lon. "You may know me. I am the Boy Nightingale of New York, and if this was the proper place for proof, I would give it by singing one of my songs."

By this time the two had reached a street lamp, and the policeman held Lon at arm's

length and looked closely at him a few moments.

"I see now! You are the warbler, sure enough!" he said. "I've heard your songs more than once, and you've taken my pennies, too. See here; if I let you go, will you promise to surrender yourself if Sampson reports the loss of any of his pets?"

"Certainly I will," returned Lon laughing at the proposition. "You can search me besides, and if you find any leopards in my pockets you can take me straight to the station now."

"I won't do that. You ain't under arrest any more than I am. Now, mebbe you had better get out o' this neighborhood. Old Sampson may be smellin' round after you, an' I wouldn't like to tell what I've seen."

The hand of the policeman no longer touched the boy's person, but before he drew back he thanked his deliverer and promised to remember the rescue in some substantial manner in the future.

"That was downright fortune!" cried the boy balladist, as he turned the corner and bounded away. "I won't forget that big cop for his favor and I'll pay him back in some manner, too. Now Messrs. Hunt and Fleece, and all the rest of the crowd, we'll see who wins this game. Shall I go back to Uncle Billy before I find Kit? I think I should look the detective up first."

Ten minutes later and just as he was about to turn into the lodgings occupied by Mr. Kit, Little Lon ran against a man who uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"Here! in Heaven's name—"

He made a dive at the boy as he broke his sentence, but Lon darted back and answered with a laugh as he vanished:

"No more traps to-night, Mr. Holly Hunt!"

CHAPTER XII.

SCHEMING A NEW TRICK.

"I CANNOT be mistaken. That was the young weasel I left at Sampson's. But how did he get out of the trap? I thought it almost tight enough to hold water, but here the boy was a moment ago, and he slipped through my fingers with the ease of an eel."

Thus spake Mr. Holly Hunt when he had seen Little Lon vanish he hardly knew whither, and he bit his lips with chagrin when he fully realized the boy's escape.

It was useless to look for Mr. Kit's youthful partner, and after a while Hunt withdrew.

He had come to the vicinity of the detective's lodgings for the purpose of keeping track of Mr. Kit, for both he and Fleece, his comrade in the plot, had discovered that the detective had received some important news from the boy.

But he had not been rewarded when Lon put in an appearance, and this event had quite astonished him.

He went back to Sampson's den and when he got inside he found the little man in a state of excitement.

Sampson had discovered his loss and unable to get revenge in any other manner he had beaten some of his pets unmercifully.

When he saw Hunt instead of quieting down he flew into a perfect blaze of rage and denounced his visitor as being the real cause of his misfortunes.

"I sha'n't be safe now," cried he. "The boy will tell the police. They will enter my house; they will put me under arrest and my pets will be scattered. Very well, I may use my tongue. I have one, you know, Mr. Hunt."

Holly Hunt grew almost black in the face.

He did not believe that Little Lon would communicate with the police, but he did not like the threat poorly concealed by his last words.

Still he knew better than to cross the little man for he feared the teeth and claws of the dreaded "pets" which the turn of a knob or the slipping of a bolt might launch upon him.

He did, therefore, the most sensible thing under the circumstances—he withdrew with a promise that Sampson should not lose anything by the boy's escape, and when he had gained the street he congratulated himself on his good luck.

Meantime the young Nightingale who had dodged out of Holly Hunt's sight before he could be held, had come back to the scene of the adventure and had climbed the steps leading to the detective's rooms.

He found nobody at home to receive him and as a good bed invited him, he threw himself upon it and in a minute was sound asleep.

So sound was his slumber that he did not hear the door open with considerable noise, and when he was awakened by a sharp touch he saw Mr. Kit standing over him and the light of another day was streaming into the room.

It did not take Lon long to narrate his exciting adventures since leaving the detective, and Mr. Kit in return told about Uncle Billy's visit to Natalie's home and its results.

The boy laughed heartily over the fat man's unceremonious descent of the stairs.

"I don't think you could hurt Uncle Billy if you were to drop him from the top of Trinity steeple," said he. "He would rebound like a rubber ball. But I did not think the old fellow had any matrimonial notions, though Natalie is good enough for anybody. What do you imagine was Uncle Billy's scheme?"

"Simply this, my boy," replied the detective. "Uncle Billy believes that he has a hold on the person or persons who has Mrs. Nestor's fortune. He is sharp enough to know that Natalie is the mistress of the little household—she proved that to his satisfaction last night—and without obtaining an influence over her the money would never be secure in his hands. Hence his proposition to the Nestors. If he could have secured the widow's promise that Natalie should become his in exchange for the stolen fortune, he would move at once on the prize."

"I wonder how he made his discoveries?"

"Uncle Billy is an old fox. He hasn't kept his room all the time you were singing on the streets, but on the contrary he has been quite often from home. Besides when he saw the firm name of 'Brawn and Borrow' on the copper you brought in the other night, he did not chuckle to himself for nothing. He recognized the name of an old acquaintance."

"Benjamin Brawn, eh?"

"Mrs. Nestor's enemy."

A moment's silence ensued.

"What have you found out about Carlos Condine?" suddenly asked Lon.

"One thing for certain. He is masquerading under a name which is not his own."

"Under whose name, Mr. Kit?" Little Lon ventured to ask.

"Carlos Condine is the genuine Benjamin Brawn."

The boy balladist opened his eyes.

"I see!" he exclaimed. "That is why Hunt and Fleece sought to get a hold on him."

"Just so. Some-how-or-other they discovered the trap-door in the ceiling of the private room, and you were conducted to an apartment directly above it by way of the adjoining house which on that side touches Carlos Condine's residence. They got possession of the compromising papers, as you know. What they are I cannot say, but they are of great value to all parties concerned."

"Have they yet moved on Carlos?"

"No, but I am confident that their plans are laid, and that they will strike in a short time, probably to-day. It was a bold move to throw you into Sampson's clutches, and your escape is one of the luckiest events in my detective experience."

"And the most fortunate episode in my own career also, Mr. Kit," smiled the boy. "When I was in the window between policemen and leopard, I did not know what was to happen next."

The detective could not suppress a laugh when he imagined his young partner midway between two uncertainties, and Little Lon joined in with a good will.

"Do you think my escape will deter Hunt and Fleece from attempting to carry out their scheme?" the boy detective queried.

"No. There is too much at stake. Mrs. Nestor was robbed of a fortune worth fifty thousand dollars some years ago, and as Carlos Condine, or Benjamin Brawn, call him by either name, Lon, has made some excellent investments since, it has not decreased any. The two rascals and Uncle Billy will let nothing but absolute defeat baffle them, and, that is just what they're going to get or I'm not Kit Christopher, detective."

"Natalie must have taken Uncle Billy by surprise," said the boy.

"She nearly tumbled the old fellow off his chair when she opened on him," replied Mr. Kit. "The door happened to be ajar, and from my position outside I saw and heard all. I'd go through fire and water for Natalie now."

"That's just what I've been ready to do all along," exclaimed Lon.

The detective now opened a drawer at a table and wrote for a minute on some paper which he took from it.

Little Lon watched him with boyish curiosity, and when he folded the paper he wondered if it was to go somewhere by mail.

"I want you to take this to Carlos Condine

and wait for an answer," remarked the detective, handing the writing toward the boy.

Lon drew back and gave his friend a look of amazement.

"To Carlos Condine?" he echoed taking the letter.

"Yes," smiled Mr. Kit.

"Maybe he'll put me under arrest for robbing him!"

"What! there's not the slightest danger of him doing that. He has not the remotest idea of the identity of his burglar. Look at the note, Lon; there are no secrets between us in this battle."

The boy opened the paper on which the ink was hardly dry and read as follows:

"CARLOS CONDINE:—SIR—Will you receive at six o'clock to-day a gentleman who can be of great service to a person just now in considerable trouble. Answer by the bearer who will give no information concerning the matter mentioned above."

"Respectfully, X."

"I want you to have a good look at Mr. Condine," said the detective as Lon looked up after reading the note. "Besides this, I also want you to see him at home. Mrs. Nestor has shown you a photograph of Benjamin Brawn, I believe?"

"She has."

"Keep it in mind while you are in the house. If you should discover that you are watched by either Hunt or Fleece, give them the slip."

"Won't I, though?" cried the boy pocketing the note. "I don't want to go back to Sampson and his pets just yet!"

CHAPTER XIII.

BLD.

LITTLE LON was rather curious to go back to the house which he had plundered for the two graceless scamps Hunt and Fleece.

He was anxious to see Carlos Condine at home, for since Mr. Kit the detective had told him that the man was none other than Mrs. Nestor's old enemy Benjamin Brawn, he took more interest in him than before.

There was some danger connected with the visit the boy was about to make. There is always a risk in visiting a thorough-paced rascal, and Lon did not know what Carlos Condine may have discovered about the burglary.

However eager to help finish the game in which he was engaged, the street Nightingale soon set out for the house with the detective's letter in his pocket.

It was a warm summer morning and a lot of sparrows were making merry in the trees in front of Condine's house when he reached it.

The shutters were drawn, and there was not much sign of human life about the place, but this did not deter the boy.

Mounting the steps he was about to jerk the bell when he discovered that the door stood slightly ajar as if the last person in or out had forgotten to close it.

For all this Lon would have rung the bell, but just as his hand touched the brass knocker he heard a voice that stayed it.

"You want to go slow, sir. This is no child's play," said the voice.

The tones seemed to hold the boy spellbound on the steps.

They came to him from within the house, and from a point not very distant, either.

"Are you ahead of me, Holly Hunt?" asked Lon. "I did not look for this, but Mr. Kit thought you or your partner would drop a thunderbolt of some kind to-day. You are right, old fellow. This is not child's play, and you will find it out to your sorrow before we are through with you."

It would have taken a stronger arm than his own to have held the boy shadow back after the words he had heard.

The door did not stand ajar for nothing.

Lon pushed it open, and found that it did not make a noise.

The next second he was inside and the only person in a dark hallway in which he could barely make out the outlines of a wide staircase that ran upward toward the ceiling.

The sound of voices guided the boy forward, and he tiptoed along the wall until he reached the foot of the stairs.

Climbing the steps cautiously he halted about half-way up the flight where the shadows lay thick enough to afford a good covert.

He was now opposite the room where the unseen men were, and then he made the discovery that the sound had come out over an open transom, and that, though it was full day without, a light was burning in the chamber.

Presently Lon saw the figures of two men in the room. The one standing at the table he recognized as Holly Hunt, and he knew that the other must be Carlos Condine.

Holly Hunt stood erect with folded arms, and his eyes, flashing with triumph, told Lon that he had the other in his grip.

"What if I thought fit to turn you over to the police?" said Mr. Hunt, looking down at the man who occupied an arm-chair at the table. "You don't want the game to take that turn, do you?"

"I don't want trouble of any kind," was the reply. "But you have offered no proof that I am not Carlos Condine, as you say."

Holly Hunt broke into a derisive laugh.

"Oh, we have plenty of it!" he exclaimed. "Why, do you think I would come here with my assertions not knowing that you were Benjamin Brawn? You lost some papers not long ago."

Carlos Condine was almost projected from his chair by these words.

He lost color and appeared to gasp.

"Well, supposing those papers were placed in certain hands?" Holly Hunt went on.

Condine clinched his teeth and glared at his visitor, who did not lose his temper for a moment.

"What will you give for the documents?" asked Hunt.

The man in the chair seemed to take a spasm of resolution.

"You can't produce them!" he said boldly.

"Can't, eh?" laughed Holly Hunt, and his hand suddenly disappeared beneath his coat.

"What do you think of this?"

At the same time he threw a bit of paper of an irregular shape upon the table, and Carlos Condine looked at it with a startled expression.

"I guess that is proof enough, isn't it?" continued Holly Hunt. "Now you will allow me to repeat my question: What will you give for the papers, box and all?"

"What will he do?" thought Little Lon, while he watched Carlos Condine, on whom so much seemed to depend. "Will he dare the bleeder or will he permit himself to be bled of some other people's money?"

Carlos Condine did not speak for a moment.

Holly Hunt eyed his victim like a hawk.

"What do you ask for the papers?" Carlos queried in a hoarse voice.

The answer was prompt but startling:

"Ten thousand dollars."

Condine, who had leaned forward, fell back in his chair, and his jaws dropped apart.

"Did I frighten you?" exclaimed the black-mailer. "What is the sum I named to the wealth you possess?"

"I am not rich."

"Croesus would make the same statement in your shoes. Come, come, as I said a while ago, this is not child's play. I am in dead earnest, and I know every card I hold. I want ten thousand dollars for the papers and without it—"

He stopped and seemed to measure his words ere he finished.

"And without it, you may hold yourself responsible for what happens!"

The two men looked at each other with eyes that glittered like the points of polished rapiers.

"Rascal and rascal!" mentally cried the little witness on the stair.

"You don't want the papers, it seems," said Holly Hunt. "Very well. They will interest certain other and—"

"I haven't said that I don't want them, sir!" interrupted Condine, his lips quivering while he spoke. "I will pay your price on one condition."

"Name it."

"We are never to meet again. Never! You understand the full meaning of the word?"

"I think I do."

"Well?"

"I accept."

"Then, bring me the documents."

Once more Holly Hunt's hand went beneath his coat, and Carlos Condine was seen to throw a rapid glance toward the door.

"He is going to try to take the papers without paying the ten thousand!" exclaimed the boy balladist. "Carlos thinks he can overcome Holly Hunt, but I think he had better not try it."

It did look for a second as though the man in the chair was going to spring up tiger-like at the man before him. He had not suspected till then that Holly Hunt had the stolen papers about his person, and a man who has had more than one hand in crime and who is driven to desperation will do anything.

While Carlos eyed his visitor the latter drew his hand forth.

It clutched a packet wrapped up and tied, and he held it in such a way that Carlos could see it.

"They are here," said Holly Hunt glancing down at the package. "I am ready to carry out my part of the bargain. Don't neglect yours."

The boy saw Carlos turn to a drawer in the table and take out a check-book.

"I don't want it that way," said the inexorable foe. "I want the money."

"You'll want blood next," growled Carlos Condine with an evil flash.

"No, the law wants that."

The man with two names crossed the room to an iron safe that filled one corner. Holly Hunt's eye followed him with fiendish pleasure.

Carlos opened the safe and knelt before it. He counted out a lot of bills and came back to the man coolly waiting for him.

"The money is all O. K.," smiled Holly Hunt when he had counted the pile, and then he handed the packet across the table.

"Good-morning," he continued.

Condine's response was a growl, but immediately he exclaimed:

"Remember! we are never to meet again!"

"Oh, I guess I've got a memory!" laughed Holly Hunt.

He left his victim in the chair and came out into the hall.

Little Lon saw him open the door and halt on the threshold for a second while he looked back toward the room.

"Visit number one!" he laughed. "This is only the entering wedge, Ben Brawn. We've got you in the net, and you're fatally gilled! Hal hal hal!"

The door opened wider and shut, and the blackmailer was gone.

The boy witness turned immediately to look at Carlos Condine.

The man sat in the chair like a person in a stupor; but all at once he sprung up, threw the package unopened into the safe and slammed the door upon it.

"My claw has cost me ten thousand dollars, but if I follow it up the sum will have been well spent!" he exclaimed. "I will push them to the wall, for Holly Hunt is not alone in this scheme. I will play detective myself. I know how to work a secret case. Ben Brawn has had some experience in that line. I hate detectives, for I've had the hounds on my trail."

"Yes, Carlos," smiled Little Lon on the stair. "And the hounds are on your trail to-day!"

CHAPTER XIV.

UNCLE BILLY DISCLOSES.

WHEN Carlos cooled down he went back to the papers he had placed in the safe. He wanted to see whether Holly Hunt had brought all back, and his close attention to the pile before him soon rendered him oblivious of his surroundings.

Little Lon who had been waiting for a chance to get out of his predicament thought he saw his opportunity.

He stole down-stairs and opened the door without noise, then he turned and jerked the bell.

The clear tones reverberating through the hall startled Carlos.

He knew that he was the occupant of the house at that hour, so putting the papers aside with a growl he went to the door himself.

Of course he found the Boy Nightingale on the step.

In a moment Lon had taken the detective's note from his pocket and extended it.

Carlos Condine read it in an instant and then looked at the boy.

"Who sent this?" he asked.

Lon shook his head.

"Oh, I see that you know nothing; the letter tells me this, but I would like to know whether it comes from a responsible party."

"I can say that it does. I guess that much won't be violating anything," answered Lon with a smile.

"Come in."

Carlos led the way to the room in which the interview with Holly Hunt had just taken place.

In a little while he had scribbled a reply on a slip of paper. He sealed this and handed it to the boy.

"Deliver that to Mr. X," said Carlos. "Now, sir, good-day," and Lon found himself dismissed without further ceremony.

Well willing to quit the house after what he

had seen, the boy detective touched his hat to Carlos and went out.

"I saw more than I expected, and I fancy Mr. Kit will have some work in another direction," exclaimed the boy. "I was lucky in seeing Mr. Holly Hunt play a part of his hand. Carlos Condine has received back the papers I took from him when I was in the rascal's employ, but he isn't satisfied. He knows that Hunt and Fleece have just entered a wedge, and that they will bleed him again and again if they are not checked. And all of that ten thousand rightfully belongs to Natalie and her mother, for Carlos Condine is Benjamin Brawn, and he carries in his bosom the secret of the real Condine's disappearance. That is what Holly Hunt meant when he said that it was the law that wanted blood and not him. Brawn and Condine are the men who defrauded Mrs. Nestor out of her inheritance, and now Brawn is living under Condine's name. There's an old crime there."

By this time Lon was back to Mr. Kit's lodgings.

He found the detective waiting for him, and when he had read Condine's reply, a smile appeared on his face.

"It is all right, Lon," said Kit. "The gentleman with two names will receive Mr. X at six."

Then Lon went on to narrate his experience in the hunted man's house, to all of which the detective listened with unflagging interest.

"So the first wedge reached ten thousand, did it?" he exclaimed.

"It did."

Mr. Kit took a meditative puff at his cigar.

"I wonder how far these rascals would cut each other's throats, anyhow?" he laughed. "I wouldn't mind it if it was Carlos Condine's money, but it belongs to the needy, for every dollar that that man owns grew out of his scheme which impoverished Mrs. Nestor and her child. Now, I presume Uncle Billy will be taking a hand in the fleecing business. It's about time for your old friend to show his hand somewhere, Lon."

"Don't fear for Uncle Billy. With a view of getting Natalie and her fortune, he won't keep in the background. I guess he thinks I've deserted him for good this time. I'm going to see him now."

Ten minutes later Little Lon climbed the steps he was accustomed to mount at all hours.

He wondered what Uncle Billy was doing. Would he find the old fellow asleep as he had found him on the occasion of many a return?

The boy opened the door in his usual manner without knocking.

"Hello!" yelled a voice, before he saw its owner. "Why didn't you stay a year before you came back?"

Of course the speaker was Uncle Billy himself.

He occupied his roomy arm-chair in his shirt-sleeves, and looking for all the world like life agreed with him.

Lon went forward and patted the old fellow cleverly on the shoulder.

"How do you get on with Hunt and Fleece?" queried Uncle Billy.

"Not so well as I did for awhile," replied the boy.

"Have you lost them?"

"Yes. Are they really worth looking after, Uncle Billy?"

"Great Caesar, yes!" was the exclamation. "They're worth their weight in gold to us. By the way, boy, do you see that?"

The fat man fished from his pocket a small copper coin which he balanced on one of his sound fingers.

"It is the bogus piece I brought in the other night," replied the boy.

Uncle Billy nodded and threw the copper upon the table.

"You recollect, Lon, that the name of Brawn is on that bit of copper?" he went on. "Well, I have found him in the flesh—Benjamin Brawn, the very gentleman named here."

Little Lon affected surprise.

"You did not find him in New York, I hope," he exclaimed.

"Nowhere else! Ha, ha! it is what I call a miracle!" continued Uncle Billy.

"I told you that the police wanted Ben Brawn once, and when they want a man, they want him forever."

"What did he do, Uncle Billy?"

The boy's manner was so innocent and deceiving that even the shrewd fat man was completely taken by it.

"Well, my boy, seeing that we're chums, I don't mind saying what I would keep from

other people," was his answer, as he leaned toward Lon and rested his big hands on the rounds of the chair.

"Ben Brawn, in the first place, cheated a woman out of a pretty big pile. He didn't do it at all by himself, but I guess he did most of the head work. His first crime was robbery, but the next one was worse."

"Worse than cheating a woman?" cried the boy.

"Yes, more than that, even. It was murder!"

Little Lon had made up his mind not to be surprised at anything, but Uncle Billy's revelation startled him.

"You don't mean that!" he exclaimed, falling back and staring at the speaker.

"Yes, sir, murder!" was the repetition.

"Ben Brawn killed the very man who helped him fleece the widow, and now he is living under his victim's name."

"Here?"

"Right here in New York!" cried Uncle Billy, bringing his clinched hand down upon the chair with emphasis.

"When did you find this out?"

"Never mind when. I know it, boy, and if I don't feather my nest, I'll know why not."

"Is there a reward out for Benjamin Brawn?"

"No. I don't have to work for anything of that sort," smiled Uncle Billy. "I've got a better thing than that."

"How grand it would be to make Ben Brawn disgorge and make the widow happy if she be living yet," said Little Lon. "But she's dead now, isn't she, Uncle Billy?"

In an instant the fat man fell back in his chair, and looked for a moment and with a pleased expression at his *protege*.

"That woman dead? I guess not!" he exclaimed. "I can find her too, ha, ha!"

"Why, you'd make a good detective!" laughed Lon, admiringly.

"I think I could beat a good many I've heard of," was the quick retort. "Now, we're going to increase our capital, Lon."

"How?"

"I shall make use of the various discoveries I have made."

"You will turn Ben Brawn over to the police and—"

"Not while I can make use of him in a financial way!" broke in the fat man. "I've got a big scheme in my head, Lon. It involves thousands. When I have won, you won't have to sing on the streets any more, and I'll have as pretty a wife as any man in Gotham."

"You, Uncle Billy?"

"I—William Bludsoe Bilks, Esquire!" laughed the fat man, uproariously.

CHAPTER XV.

A FOX'S FALL.

MR. KIT, the detective, kept to the very minute of his engagement with Carlos Condine.

When he came back from the interview his countenance wore an expression of satisfaction, but as Little Lon was not at the lodgings to greet him he did not have to make known the results of his trip.

The boy balladist had some time before concluded his interview with Uncle Billy whose disclosures were in the nature of a revelation so far as the accusation of murder against Carlos Condine went. Lon was almost ready to believe anything against the men who had despoiled his friends, the Nestors, and reduced them to a state of poverty.

The more he thought of the outrage the more indignant he became, and often that day he remembered his oath to see that the great wrong was righted and the guilty punished.

It was while the detective was at Carlos Condine's house that a man came out of a certain building and walked off.

At the first corner he was joined by another man and the two proceeded onward together.

They were Hunt and Fleece the two rascals who had just bled Carlos.

If they had looked carefully back they would have seen a boy following them.

Little Lon had seen Fleece on the corner apparently waiting for some one, and he rightly guessed that that one was his partner, Holly Hunt.

He followed the two men to old Sampson's house, but their repeated rings failed to elicit any response.

"That trap is empty," suddenly said a voice near the men.

"Empty?" echoed the partners in one breath.

"Yes. The old man and his pets had some kind of a falling out. The police broke into the house this forenoon and found things in a terri-

ble condition. They had to shoot two leopards before they could discover anything. Then they found Sampson dead, terribly mangled by the spotted cats and the house was cleared. I don't know what they did with the body and the pets, but there's nothing in there now."

The two men looked at each other and turned away.

"Well," said Fleece, "the old fellow's death keeps a secret or two. Now if we can corral the boy and keep him from playing some hand against us we are safe. He may have gone back to his street singing, but it is not very likely."

Little Lon was determined to keep the two men in sight. They went back to their new lodgings, and disappeared beyond the door.

"Day after to-morrow, you must play trump number two," said Holly Hunt addressing his companion when they were in a small room on the second floor of the building. "Make it ten thousand again. He will pay. This time we have no papers to sell, but we've got the evidence of a certain deed done one night on the platform of a flying train between New York and the West. That night Benjamin Brawn lost a partner who was found dead along the track the next day. Our secret is big enough to ask twenty thousand for the first pull."

Fleece made a few notes on a piece of paper and put it away.

"I want the boy snuffed out," he exclaimed. "These little foxes sometimes give one as much trouble as the big ones. I'm going to look for him now."

"Where will you look?"

"First round about the detective's quarters, next about the fat man's lodgings."

"If you find him—what?" asked Holly Hunt.

"Leave that to me," was the significant answer.

"Don't make a balk of the matter."

"I won't."

It happened that the persevering boy detective was not on guard when Fleece came out of the building with evil designs in his heart.

Although he had not left the neighborhood, he was at that particular moment interested in the efforts of a man to escape from the policeman who had just taken him for some misdemeanor.

Fleece, attracted by the same sight, went toward it, and in looking around spied Little Lon.

The discovery nearly caused the rascal to lose his breath.

"This is golden luck!" he ejaculated, watching the boy. "Why can't I rush him up-stairs to Holly before he can cry out and give me away. He isn't more than half a block from the house. I'll try it, anyway!"

Mr. Fleece stepped toward Lon with the quick tread of the tiger. The boy did not hear him.

In a moment his hand darted forward, and before Lon knew that his enemy was near his arm was in a vise-like grip and he was half-way back to the conspirators' quarters.

It was like a dream to the boy.

He was suddenly called to face a new danger—to meet an enemy who would stoop to anything to carry out his designs.

When the first surprise was over he drew back and looked up at his captor.

In an instant he recognized him as Holly Hunt's partner in rascality.

"No cries! Don't provoke me, boy!" said the man, as Lon was rushed into the house.

There he was seized by another hand and helped up-stairs in a manner that had no show of ceremony.

Fleece kicked a door open and pitched the boy forward while he followed himself and sent a bolt into its companion socket.

Holly Hunt greeted his friend's unexpected victory with an explanation of astonishment.

"The young fox already? By Jupiter, Fleece, you deserve a chromo."

Lon already stood in the middle of the room and between the two men with his figure drawn erect and indignation kindled in his eyes.

He almost believed that he had fallen into the power of two human leopards as dangerous as Sampson's pets.

"Sit down," said Holly Hunt waving the boy to a chair.

"I won't!" was the prompt response.

"Shall I make him?" asked Fleece looking at his comrade.

Holly Hunt shook his head.

"You've been playing spy," he went on addressing Lon.

"What are you engaged in just now?" was the response.

"We're attending to business," laughed Hunt.

"What have you told your friend the detective?"

"Enough I hope to let him win the game."

"Hear him!" exclaimed Fleece flushing madly as he clinched his hands. "He doesn't go back on his work at all. What do you say now, Holly?—Shall I?"

Again Fleece glared at Little Lon at whom he was ready to launch himself, but Hunt's glance held him back.

"What do you think is up?" continued Holly Hunt. "You must presume that we are engaged in some dark business."

The boy gave the inquisitor a smile for his question.

"You half answer yourself, Holly Hunt," said he. "I choose to keep my own secrets."

"You can't make him talk, but I can!" broke in Fleece, trembling with rage a few feet from the street Nightingale.

"You know nothing, boy," Hunt went on tauntingly. "You pretend to be able to trip us in some manner, but you cannot."

There was no answer. Fleece moved a step nearer Lon and bit his lips while he waited for the signal.

"What have you seen lately?" queried Hunt.

"Enough, I think."

"Tell me one thing."

"I keep my secrets."

"I can start him!" flashed Fleece.

Little Lon saw what was coming by the angry light that leaped up in the speaker's eyes.

He stepped back and caught up a chair.

"Look!" cried Holly Hunt's partner. "He thinks he can stop me with that weapon. The fox is caught and he must not get away. He got off from Sampson and the leopards, but he shall not cheat us."

"Stand back!" said the street balladist, elevating the chair.

"A boy and a chair! Hol hol!" laughed Fleece.

Then he went straight at Little Lon, who had retreated nearly to the open window behind him.

The succeeding instant the chair descended with all the power the boy could give it, and one leg landed squarely in Fleece's face, sending the blood in every direction, and hurling him back with a cry of pain.

Holly Hunt sprang up and came toward Lon, who threw the chair at him with all his might; then, without waiting to see the result of his throw, he was out of the window in a jiffy.

"He must not escape!" cried Fleece, rushing forward. "We're lost if he does!"

But he was too late, for all at once the boy's hands disappeared, and the two rascals heard him strike the sidewalk below with a sickening cry.

"Well, it wasn't an escape after all," grinned Holly Hunt, turning away from the window.

"The fox was killed by the fall."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE UNPLAYED CARD.

EVERYTHING went to show that Holly Hunt had spoken the truth, for when he turned from the window, a man was lifting the limp body of Little Lon from the cruel stones of the pavement, and a sympathetic crowd had already assembled.

Foreseeing an investigation, the two worthies beat a hasty retreat, and left the building by the back way.

They were not a moment too soon, for an officer remained on the ground after the ambulance had taken Lon to the hospital, and in a little while he was knocking at the door of the deserted chamber.

The surgeon who examined the boy's bruises while he remained unconscious, pronounced them not dangerous, and Lon was left in the accident ward.

Mr. Kit, the detective, knew nothing of these occurrences.

At the time he was off on a bit of business which was closely connected with our story.

The city shadow had resolved to make short work of matters.

He had been engaged by Carlos Condine to run down the man who had sold him back his own property, though he had not represented himself to Carlos as a detective.

In the first place, Mr. Kit visited the Nestors, but did not tell them that he was on a trail which greatly pleased him.

After this he went to that quarter of the city inhabited by Uncle Billy.

"His name isn't Bilks, but Barlow," said the detective to himself. "Mrs. Nestor startled him by speaking the name he bore when he was the friend of Brawn and Condine in Chicago. I

am going to check the fat man before he can throw a card, because I don't want to be bothered by him. He must either tell me his secret or go to prison."

The shadows of night had fallen once more as the detective went up the stair to Uncle Billy's lodgings.

He did not expect to find the old fellow in.

"I'll toss it up once more," said a voice beyond the door as Mr. Kit was about to knock. "If it falls heads I'll throw my card to-night, tails, to-morrow."

Immediately after these words a coin of some kind was heard to ring on the table, and Mr. Kit listened with a smile on his face.

"Heads, by Jupiter!" cried the same voice. "I'll keep my word and go this very minute. Of course Lon won't drop in while I'm gone. If he should, however, he can wait for me or go out again."

The man at the door heard a shuffling of feet on the bare floor beyond and concluded that Uncle Billy was making his toilet for the intended visit.

Then he knocked and the noises grew still.

Presently footsteps came toward the door and it was opened.

"Gracious!" cried Uncle Billy drawing back and looking at his visitor. "I don't have many visitors at this hour, but come in. Business is always business with me."

Of course the detective walked across the threshold.

"I hope I have not disturbed you at your evening toilet?" he observed with a smile.

The fat man answered promptly in the negative.

He did not have the remotest idea of going out any more that night, and Mr. Kit began to doubt the evidences of the senses under the man's asseverations.

"I am Kit Christopher," began the detective, wondering if his name might not be a familiar one to the fat plotter.

Uncle Billy did not start in the least.

"I have called on a matter of interest to several members of the human family."

"Aha! that is good. I hope I am one of them, Mr. Christopher," smiled the fat man rubbing his hands.

"You are interested, rather deeply so."

"Is it a matter of money?"

"It is not much else."

With Uncle Billy it was always money—money.

"Now, Mr.—Bilks, I believe," continued the detective, "when did you last see a certain gentleman named Condine?"

In a moment the fluffly face of Uncle Billy got crimson to the temples, then it suddenly grew ghastly.

"Do not go off into a general denial," Mr. Kit went on before the heavy man caught his breath. "I know what I am talking about, and I know something about the man who is listening just now. Let me repeat my question. When—"

"It isn't necessary sir—indeed it isn't!" broke in Uncle Billy, putting up his hands as if to keep off something disagreeable.

"Then you will answer me?"

"What are you?—a detective?"

Mr. Kit answered first with a smile.

"You are! I know it!" exclaimed the fat man.

"Well, are you afraid of detectives?"

Uncle Billy shrugged his shoulders.

"Now go on," said Mr. Kit somewhat sternly.

"Concerning Carlos Condine?"

"Yes."

"Well, I used to know him."

"In Chicago?"

"Perhaps."

"When he and Benjamin Brawn were operating there?"

"Yes."

The detective did not propose to waste time questioning Uncle Billy like a witness on the stand.

He leaned toward Little Lon's employer and laid his hand on his knee.

"You can tell me the whole story now or go with me to the station," he said, accompanying the words with a stern look.

Uncle Billy knew that every word of the sentence was meant.

He wondered how the detective had arrived at the point he had gained. Did he really know anything, or was he only letting on so as to pump him dry?

"What are you going to do?" suddenly asked Kit.

"I shall tell the story," suddenly decided Uncle Billy.

"Then, go on."

The detective settled back in the chair and looked at his man.

"My name is Barlow," he began. "A few years ago I encountered Benjamin Brawn in Chicago. At that time he had a good deal of money and spent it freely. He was one of those men who know a good deal about other people's affairs, and he made looking up lost heirs and estates a specialty. He had a friend named Condine at the time. They were much together. When I fell in with them they had a pretty scheme in hand. It was to get a fortune without much hard work.

"Some-how-or-other Brawn discovered that an ample fortune was about to fall to a family named Nestor. He was a lucky fellow with discoveries of this sort, Brawn was. I thought I saw a chance for myself, and I clung to the two partners, but all for nothing. The husband of Mrs. Nestor died, and by some pretty shrewd work, which included a lot of forged papers and some tough swearing, the fortune dropped into the partners' laps. I got nothing, for the men left Chicago with the prize.

"I resolved not to be beaten in that manner, so I followed them, believing that they had come direct to New York, which was the case. The Nestors were poor now, for the head of the house had left them nothing. I was not here long before they came."

"One question right here, Mr. Barlow," put in the detective. "Who advised them to come?"

"I did, sir," answered Uncle Billy promptly. "I'm going to make a clean breast of the whole thing because I wouldn't go to the station for all New York. Well, after a while I found Benjamin Brawn. He was living in clover on the proceeds of the Chicago game. He had money enough to make him a prince in some countries, but yet he wasn't wearing his own name. He had dropped it and had taken his companion's name. Queer, isn't it?"

"Yes," admitted the detective.

"Not so very queer when you know all," continued Uncle Billy. "Before he left Chicago he had discovered that Carlos Condine was an heir to some property in England. This Carlos did not know himself. Ben Brawn had all the facts. On the way here the real Carlos Condine fell from the train when he and his companion were on the platform together! It was an accident, of course! Well, the man who was thus killed was said to be Benjamin Brawn, and Carlos Condine came on alone. I call that pretty slick.

"I can't tell you how I found all this out; but I picked up a link now and a link then, till I had the chain complete. There are two men in New York who saw the 'accident' on the train.

"Hunt and Fleece?"

"Yes."

"I thought so," smiled the detective. "Now, Mr. Barlow, you have told all, I believe?"

Uncle Billy looked willing to quit.

"Of course this confession keeps you from throwing your card to-night."

"It does, sir."

"It also keeps you out of the station."

"I'm glad of that. I am subject to heart disease and suffocating fits. I would die there in an hour. I want to get even with Ben Brawn for cheating me in Chicago."

"Out of your share of a robbery, eh?"

Uncle Billy was silent, and Kit the detective left his chair with victory in his eye.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WAGES OF SIN.

CARLOS CONDINE thought he had executed a fine move.

He had employed a gentleman to ferret out a certain man and his partner who threatened to give him a great deal of trouble.

If he had dreamed that the person in his employ was Mr. Kit, the detective, he would not have felt so sanguine of ultimate success, but, on the other hand, he might have thought of final defeat.

He had paid ten thousand dollars in cold cash for some papers which he should have destroyed long before. They compromised him in a terrible manner, but now that they were back in his hands, he resolved to make short work of them.

The day after the detective's visit he took the documents from the safe and made a fire in the grate.

It was a warm day, but Carlos thought he could stand a little more warmth, in order to destroy some evidences of guilt.

He walked up to the grate with the papers in his hand and began to throw them into the fire one by one.

A strange smile of triumph and intense satisfaction spread over his countenance.

It looked a little like throwing ten thousand dollars into the fire, but Carlos did not care for that.

Holly Hunt would never get another chance to sell the papers again!

The last one was in his hand when the bell rung with a suddenness that nearly took him off his feet.

Carlos stepped back with the last document undestroyed. He lost color and his hand shook.

"I don't want anybody in here now!" he cried. "I must tell Marie to admit no one. She is going to the door now, and—"

He had reached the hall door at this moment and the voice of the maid a few feet away had broken his sentence.

"Who is it, Marie?" asked Carlos as the girl joined him.

"A well dressed gentleman, looks like a lawyer, and says his name is Guppert or something of the sort."

"What is his business?"

"I don't know but he says it is important."

Carlos thought a moment and then broke his resolution.

"Let him come in," said he slipping the last of the papers into his pocket, and then he went back and waited for his visitor.

In a moment he came in, a well-to-do man sure enough, with a noiseless step and easy manners.

Carlos noticed that he glanced swiftly toward the grate.

"I had Marie build a fire," said Condine. "I am subject to sudden attacks of chills. If the room is unpleasant—"

"Not at all!" was the interruption and the speaker smiled as he spoke. "My stay will be short and I am subject to chills, myself."

Carlos knew that this was derision, and then he tried to think how much he would give if he had not admitted this man.

He was not Holly Hunt after more money, and that was some consolation.

"I am here on private business," began the stranger. "In the first place, I will refresh your memory, Mr. Condine. In the month of September a few years ago you were coming east on a train. You were not alone, and your traveling companion was a gentleman of the name of—"

The man stopped and looked sharply at Carlos in a manner which riveted his attention.

"Don't you recollect the circumstances, Mr. Condine?" he suddenly went on.

"I forget many of my trips," was the reply. "I have been out of New York so often that I could not recall all the times if I would."

"But this was a trip eastward from Chicago," reminded the visitor. "Was your companion named Brawn, or—"

"Does it matter much what it was?" interrupted Carlos, clutching the arms of his chair.

"Not unless you insist," smiled Mr. Guppert. "He did not come all the way in with you. He met with an accident one night—fell from the steps of the cars, I believe, and was killed!"

Carlos Condine seemed to start from his chair, and the man before him leaned forward with a grin.

"To business," said he. "Do you think the secret of your fellow traveler's death worth keeping?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Just what I've said," was the cool rejoinder. "I don't know what you think, but I'm of the opinion that you can afford to pay ten thousand dollars for the keeping of that secret."

Carlos Condine who was red in the face a moment before was white now. His pallor was actually ghastly and his eyes had a wild, mad look.

Mr. Guppert was leaning back in his chair with a leer on his face. He knew he had launched a thunderbolt for he had just seen the effect of it.

"I don't converse on these subjects," suddenly said Carlos, a tremor in his voice.

The man laughed.

"Oh, you don't!" he exclaimed. "I admit that the death of one's companion isn't a very pleasant theme, but we won't talk about anything else while I'm here. A man who lives as you do in this house with plenty of money and a fire in the grate in the summer time with paper for fuel, can afford to pay well to keep up the style. Yes, Mr. Condine—I should call you by another name—but I will not—you will pay me ten thousand for what I know of that death, or—I'll take my secret to another market!"

This was spoken with all the finished coolness of the practiced blackmailer.

"I'd like to know who would purchase such goods," said Carlos.

"What! you refuse to look out for number one!" ejaculated the man getting up and taking his hat from the table. "There is a market for secrets of this kind and it isn't very far off, either. Keep your money, sir. No, not your money. I am mistaken. Keep the widow's fortune till the blow falls, or till you find yourself in the grip of the law for two crimes—robbery and murder!"

Carlos Condine seemed on the point of pitching headlong from his chair.

"Ain't you the partner of the other man?" he asked.

"What other man?"

There was no reply.

Carlos had reflected, and thought that it would not be policy to admit that he had been bled before.

He waved his hand toward the door, but his visitor did not move.

"You refuse, eh?" continued Guppert.

Carlos gasped.

"All right. Keep your blood-money till the law divides it among the deserving. I'm sure I don't care, Benjamin Brawn," laughed the man. "You think more of a few dollars than you do of your life. I did not think you were a fool."

He walked toward the door followed by the flashing, tigerish eyes of the man of the house.

"Why not?" said Carlos to himself. "I'll never get another chance!"

At that moment the blackmailer's back was turned on him, but it would not be so long.

All at once Carlos Condine left his chair, bounding from it like a cat.

He went across the floor in a flash, but all at once his visitor turned and threw up his hands.

"Not so fast, Benjamin!" he laughed, half savagely. "You used to be quick—you were that night on the train; but you've got a master, now."

He had caught Carlos Condine's hands and was holding them in a grip of steel as it were.

The men stood face to face and looked each other in the eye.

"You are the other man's partner. I know it!" said Carlos.

"Then you ought to know enough to pay the ten thousand without a murmur," was the response.

"You would come again—first one and then the other."

"Your fears say that."

"But isn't it true?"

The answer was another smile.

"When you walk out of this house, where will you go?" continued Carlos.

"You ought to know."

"To the police?"

"Ha! your guilty conscience once more!" grinned the other.

Carlos made an effort to release his hands, and in this he succeeded. He walked back to the table, watched by his visitor as a hawk watches a wounded mouse that crawls through the grass.

"I don't want a check," said he, seeing Carlos open a drawer. "I'll take the money."

The rich man went over to the iron safe, as he had done a short time before for Holly Hunt.

When he came back to the table he threw an unbroken package of bills upon it.

"There it is. Now for Heaven's sake go away."

Mr. Guppert transferred the money to his pocket.

"Remember! when you come again you won't get another dollar!" said Carlos. "I'll fix that for both of you."

Two minutes later Carlos Condine was alone, and the man, who was Fleece, of Hunt and Fleece, had gone to show his prize to his partner.

Not long afterward, Marie the maid admitted Mr. Kit without question. She knew his face, and she had certain orders from Carlos.

The detective went at once to the library and found its occupant in his chair at the table.

He addressed him but received no answer, and then he saw that the man of guilt was dead.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RESTITUTION.

It was a rare summer evening for heat-stricken New York, for a Heaven-sent breeze was making thousands glad, and the perspiring crowds in Battery Park and all along the wharves had hailed it with delight.

Several days have passed since the detective's discovery made at the conclusion of the chapter just finished.

A boy standing on a box under one of the grand old trees of the Battery was singing to hundreds of people, and his rich voice floated far out across the boat-dotted waters of the harbor.

All at once the song seemed to break, and the listeners wondered what had happened.

But almost instantly the young Nightingale caught the broken chords and welded them so deftly that a murmur of applause was his reward, and the song went on without accident to the end.

The crowd had not had enough, but the boy had.

He refused to sing any more, and what was stranger still when the appreciative gentleman who had collected the pennies presented him with half a hatful of coin, he refused the gift.

In another moment the boy balladist had vanished.

Of course it was our old acquaintance, Little Lon, whom we left in the accident ward of the hospital after his fall from the window in his efforts to escape from Holly Hunt and his partner.

Good health and strength had brought Lon through quicker than he expected.

He left the hospital about the time of Mr. Kit's discovery of Carlos Condine's death. Since that time he had been busy.

Hunt and Fleece, the rascals who had twenty thousand dollars of Mrs. Nestor's money in their possession, were not to be found, and Lon with Mr. Kit had hunted high and low for them.

It was known, or believed at least by the two, that Carlos Condine, *alias* Benjamin Brawn, had taken his own life to escape further blackmail as well as punishment by the law for his crimes. He had left nearly a full confession behind, and an examination of his effects had led to the discovery that he was not as wealthy as he was supposed to be.

Therefore it was necessary to find Hunt and Fleece and make them disgorge.

Little Lon's song on the Battery had been broken by the sight of a man who had been watching him for some time.

"That is Holly Hunt," mentally ejaculated the street Nightingale. "I photographed him and his partner so well on my mind the first time I saw them that I don't think either can deceive me. I won't lose sight of Holly this time."

When he darted into the crowd at the termination of his concert, he came out near the spot where he had last seen his man.

He was still there, but in the act of turning away.

Lon prepared at once to follow him.

"There's no danger of getting into Old Sampson's this time," he said to himself. "I shall keep my eyes open, for we must find the two rascals in order to give Natalie a decent wedding dowry when she marries young Roy and not Uncle Billy."

Holly Hunt had not the remotest idea that his late little prisoner was at his heels when he sauntered from the Park.

Not far away he was joined by a man at whom Lon had to look twice before he recognized Mr. Fleece, the second member of the firm.

The two proceeded onward together and Lon shadowed them to an odd-looking house which he would not have accused of harboring such well-to-do-gentlemen as Hunt and Fleece.

Having seen them inside the boy went to Mr. Kit's lodgings and found that worthy in.

"So you have the wolves, eh?" smiled the detective slipping two pairs of handcuffs into his pocket. "Let us be off. I am anxious to close in on the game before it is too late."

The two friends went down to the odd-looking house just in time to see Holly Hunt and his partner come out.

The short evening twilight had fled and the lights of New York were again in full blaze.

Mr. Fleece carried a small valise in his hand and Holly Hunt had effected an entire change of clothes.

"Just in time, boy," said Mr. Kit. "The birds are just taking wing."

As the two scamps came forward Lon and his friend drew back and waited.

Mr. Kit held the manacles ready.

"He kept his word, sure enough," murmured Fleece. "He told me that he would get ahead of us and so he did—by dying. Well, it wasn't such a bad haul, after all. We got two tens, anyhow, and the fat man and the detective won't get their fingers on any of that."

The following moment the figure of the detective stepped into the rascals' path.

"Halt, gentlemen," cried he, throwing up one

hand which held a revolver while the boy singer did the same.

"Kit Christopher doesn't want a dollar of the money at stake in this game. He wants the men engaged in it. You are under arrest!"

Hunt and Fleece realized their situation before the detective before the last words had left his lips.

"Hands out!" continued Mr. Kit.

Holly Hunt was the first to obey the command, but he did it in such ill humor that both Kit and Little Lon could not keep back a smile.

Fleece, his partner, followed his example in the same spirit, and before a crowd could gather the two men were marched off, Lon carrying the valise which felt heavy and valuable.

At the station the satchel was opened and found to contain ten thousand dollars in bank notes which a search of the prisoners brought to light nearly a like amount.

The two partners were held on numerous charges among which were conspiracy and blackmail, and before Lon left he was told in no pleasant terms that they hoped to "get even" with him before long.

"You'll go up the river first, gentlemen," answered the street Nightingale with a smile.

"And there you won't get to advertise for a boy to commit a burglary for you, and you won't find Benjamin Brawn up there to become your victim again."

When Lon went back to Uncle Billy's lodgings to tell him about the close of the game, he found the old room empty, but on the table lay a folded note addressed to him.

He opened it with a great deal of wonderment in his eyes and read as follows:

"MY LITTLE BIRD:—

"Uncle Billy has concluded to seek another climate. There are some people here who are always interfering with other people's business. You will find a legacy in the cupboard. You have earned it with your voice, for you have been my slave a long time. Give my love—if she wants it—to Natalie, and tell Mr. Kit that I thank him for not dragging me down to the police station. I shall try to keep out of scrapes hereafter. I know that Benjamin Brawn is dead. This is all, Lon. If I have been a hard master at times, I liked you all the same. Good-by. UNCLE BILLY."

Despite the character of the writer, Little Lon's eyes filled up when he reached the signature, and he said with a sigh:

"Good-by, old fellow. I can't wish you any harm after all."

The lost fortune, or nearly all of it, came back to the Nestors through the good work of Mr. Kit and Little Lon, and not long afterward Natalie became the wife of her lover Roy.

The boy singer would not accept any reward for his services, for the legacy which Uncle Billy had left behind proved to be a considerable sum—enough to enable him to live at his ease.

He and Mr. Kit are firm friends still, and both are engaged in ferreting out crime in the great metropolis.

Uncle Billy has not been heard from since his unexpected flight, and the two birds of blackmail are still looking through the iron diamonds of Sing Sing.

Every now and then Little Lon goes down to a certain house on a quiet street and gives a concert for the gratification of Natalie's little ones.

Sometimes Mr. Kit goes along, for he is always welcome there.

THE END.

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- 550 Laffite's Legacy; or, The Avenging Son.
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- 560 Pawnee Bill, the Prairie Shadower.
- 565 Kent Kingston, the Card King.
- 570 Camille, the Card Queen.
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- 580 The Outcast Cadet; or, The False Detective.
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- 591 Delmonte, the Young Sea-Rover.
- 597 The Young Texan Detective.
- 602 The Vagabond of the Mines.
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- 644 The Hercules Highwayman.
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- 656 Butterfly Billy's Man Hunt.
- 662 Butterfly Billy's Bonanza.
- 668 The Buccaneer Midshipman.
- 674 The Wizard Sailor; or, Red Ralph, the Rover.
- 679 The Sea Shadower; or, The Freebooter's Legacy.
- 686 Orlando, the Ocean Free Flag; or, The Tarnished Name.
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- 697 The Scarlet Sombrero; or, The Sharp from Texas.

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- 8 Kansas King; or, The Red Right Hand.
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- 55 Deadly-Eye, the Unknown Scout.
- 68 Border Robin Hood; or, The Prairie Rover.
- 158 Fancy Frank of Colorado; or, The Trapper's Trust.

BY CHARLES MORRIS.

- 118 Will Somers, the Boy Detective.
- 122 Phil Hardy, the Boss Boy.
- 126 Playmate Pete; or, Nicodemus, the Dog Detective.
- 130 Detective Dick; or, The Hero in Rags.
- 142 Handsome Harry, the Bootblack Detective.
- 147 Will Wildfire, the Thoroughbred.
- 152 Black Bear, Will Wildfire's Racer.
- 157 Mike Merry, the Harbor Police Boy.
- 162 Will Wildfire in the Woods.
- 165 Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.
- 170 A Trump Card; or, Will Wildfire Wins and Loses.
- 174 Bob Rockett; or, Mysteries of New York.
- 179 Bob Rockett, the Bank Runner.
- 183 The Hidden Hand; or, Will Wildfire's Revenge.
- 187 Fred Halyard, the Life Boat Boy; or, The Smugglers.
- 189 Bob Rockett; or, Driven to the Wall.
- 196 Shadowed; or, Bob Rockett's Fight for Life.
- 206 Dark Paul, the Tiger King.
- 212 Dashing Dave, the Dandy Detective.
- 220 Tom Tanner; or, The Black Sheep of the Flock.
- 225 Sam Charcoal, the Premium Dandy.
- 235 Shadow Sam, the Messenger Boy.
- 242 The Two "Bloods"; or, Shenandoah Bill and His Gang.
- 252 Dick Dashaway; or, A Dakota Boy in Chicago.
- 262 The Young Sharps; or, Rollicking Mike's Hot Trail.
- 274 Jolly Jim, the Detective Apprentice.
- 289 Jolly Jim's Job; or, The Young Detective.
- 298 The Water-Hound; or, The Young Thoroughbred.
- 305 Dashaway, of Dakota; or, A Western Lad in Quaker City.
- 324 Ralph Ready, the Hotel Boy Detective.
- 341 Tony Thorne, the Vagabond Detective.
- 358 The Reporter Detective; or, Fred Tyler's Blitzard.
- 367 Wide-Awake Joe; or, A Boy of the Times.
- 379 Larry, the Leveler; or, The Bloods of the Boulevard.
- 403 Firefly Jack, the River-Rat Detective.
- 428 The Lost Finger; or, The Entrapped Cashier.
- 428 Fred Flyer, the Reporter Detective.
- 432 Invincible Logan, the Pinkerton Ferret.
- 456 Billy Brick, the Jolly Vagabond.
- 466 Wide-Awake Jerry, Detective; or, Entombed Alive.
- 479 Detective Dodge; or, The Mystery of Frank Hearty.
- 484 Wild Dick Racket.
- 501 Boots, the Boy Fireman; or, Too Sharp for the Sharper.
- 566 The Secret Service Boy Detective.
- 596 Jimmy the Kid; or, A Lamb Among Wolves.
- 627 Tom Bruce of Arkansas; or, The Wolf in the Fold.
- 655 Plucky Paul, the Boy Speculator.
- 667 Bob and Sam, the Daisy Detectives.

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- 360 Silver-Mask, the Man of Mystery.
- 369 Shasta, the Gold King; or, For Seven Years Dead.
- 420 The Detective's Apprentice; or, A Boy Without a Name.
- 424 Clibuta John; or, Red-Hot Times at Ante Bar.
- 439 Sandy Sam, the Street Scout.
- 467 Place Dan, the Daisy Duda.
- 490 Broadway Billy, the Bootblack Bravo.
- 506 Redlight Ralph, the Prince of the Road.
- 514 Broadway Billy's Boodle.
- 524 The Engineer Detective.
- 536 Broadway Billy's "Dimkilty."
- 548 Mart, the Night Express Detective.
- 557 Broadway Billy's Death Racket.
- 571 Air-Line Luke, the Young Engineer.
- 579 The Chimney Spy; or, Broadway Billy's Surprise-Party.
- 592 The Boy Pinkerton.
- 605 William O' Broadway; or, The Boy Detective's Big Inning.
- 615 Fighting Harry, the Chief of Chained Cyclone.
- 628 Broadway Billy's Dead Act.
- 640 Barebrek Beth, the Centaur of the Circle.
- 647 Typewriter Tilly, the Merchant's Ward.
- 659 Moonlight Morgan, the "Pizenest" Man of Ante Bar.
- 669 Broadway Billy Abroad.
- 675 Broadway Billy's Best; or, Beating San Francisco's Fire.
- 687 Broadway Billy in Clover.
- 696 Broadway Billy in Texas.

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- 23 Nick o' the Night; or, The Boy Spy of '76.
- 37 The Hidden Lodge; or, The Little Hunter.
- 47 Nightingale Nat; or, The Forest Captains.
- 64 Dandy Jack; or, The Outlaws of the Oregon Trail.
- 82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk.
- 94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
- 106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
- 128 Kiowa Charley, the White Mustang.
- 139 Judge Lynch, Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
- 155 Gold Trigger, the Sport; or, The Girl Avenger.
- 169 Tornado Tom; or, Injun Jack From Red Cora.
- 188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy.
- 198 Arkansas; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
- 207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
- 215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Tooknot's Crusade.
- 231 Plucky Phil; or, Rosa, the Red Jeebel.
- 241 Bill Bravo; or, The Ranges of the Rockies.
- 255 Captain Apollo, the King-Pin of Bowie.
- 267 The Buckskin Detective.
- 279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
- 294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowle Blade of Gochetopa.
- 302 The Mountain Detective; or, The Trigger Bar Bally.
- 316 Old Eclipse, Trump Card of Arizona.
- 326 The Ten Pard; or, The Terror of Take-Notice.
- 336 Big Benson; or, The Queen of the Lasso.
- 345 Pitiless Matt; or, Red Thunderbolt's Secret.
- 356 Cool Sam and Pard; or, The Terrible Six.
- 366 Velvet Foot, the Indian Detective.
- 386 Captain Cutlass; or, The Buccaneer's Girl Foe.
- 396 Rough Rob; or, The Twin Champions of Blue Blazes.
- 411 The Silken Lassie; or, The Rose of Ranch Robin.
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- 425 Texas Trump, the Border Rattler.
- 436 Phil Flash, the New York Fox.
- 445 The City Vampires; or, Red Rolfe's Pigeon.
- 461 One Against Fifty; or, The Last Man of Keno Bar.
- 470 The Boy Shadow; or, Felix Fox's Hunt.
- 477 The Excelsior Sport; or, The Washington Spotter.
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- 502 Branded Ben, the Night Ferret.
- 512 Dodger Dick, the Wharf-Spy Detective.
- 521 Dodger Dick's Best Dodge.
- 528 Fox and Falcon, the Bowery Shadows.
- 538 Dodger Dick, the Dock Ferret.
- 545 Dodger Dick's Double; or, The Rival Boy Detectives.
- 553 Dodger Dick's Desperate Case.
- 563 Dodger Dick, the Boy Vidocq.
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